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NEW BOYS AND THEIR RIVALS

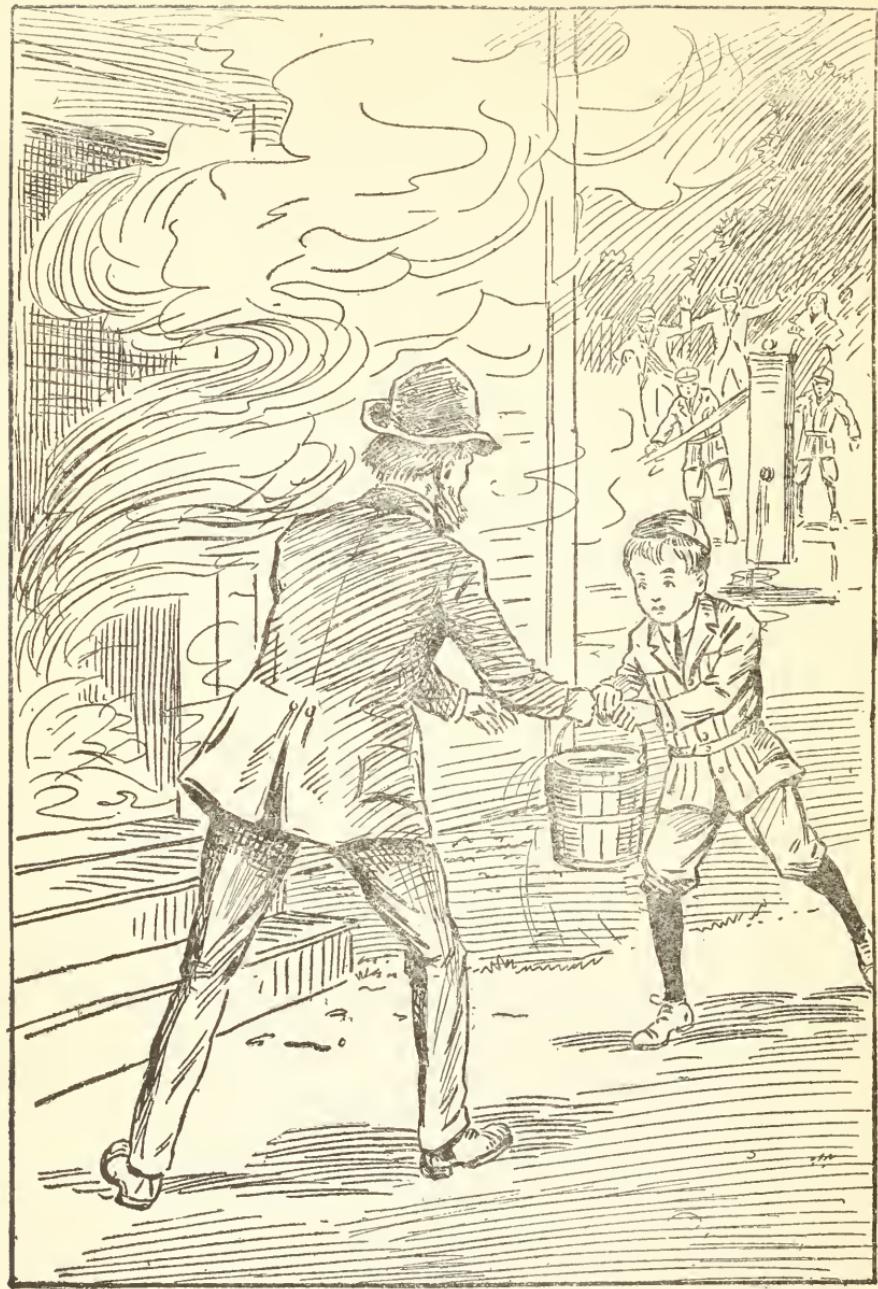


FREDERICK GORDON

WICKIE ULLMANN



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*Bob Ran with the Pail to a Man at the
Broken-in Door*

Frontispiece

FAIRVIEW BOYS AND THEIR RIVALS

OR

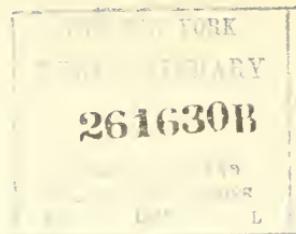
BOB BOUNCER'S SCHOOLDAYS

BY
FREDERICK GORDON

AUTHOR OF "THE YOUNG CRUSOES OF PINE ISLAND,"
"SAMMY BROWN'S TREASURE HUNT," ETC.

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—
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FAIRVIEW BOYS SERIES

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Or, Bob Bouncer's Schooldays

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Under The Title
Bob Bouncer's Schooldays

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Made in U. S. A.

Fairview Boys and Their Rivals

OR

BOB BOUNCER'S SCHOOL DAYS

CHAPTER I

THREE CHUMS

"WELL, fellows," said Frank Haven, "the long vacation is over at last."

"And now for school and study," added Sammy Brown.
"And fun!" echoed Bob Bouncer.

He was well named, was this Bob Bouncer. On this bright September morning, Bob looked full of vim and go. He skipped along the pretty village road like the active lad he was, bounding through life with a laugh and a cheer, and getting out of it plenty of fun and frolic.

"Don't look so glum, Sammy!" he cried. "If any fellows had a grand old vacation to brag of, it's us three."

"Yes, that's so, and no mistake," replied Sammy. "I'm not grumbling. I was just wishing that the boating, and the swimming, and getting wrecked on Pine Island, and that dandy time in the mountains, could last forever."

"Well," said Bob, "school isn't going to be a prison, is it? Especially this school. I found something this morning, and they say it's a sign that things will be stirring right along."

"What is it, Bob?" asked Sammy, eagerly.

"A lucky stone," replied Bob, with a chuckle, producing the object in question.

"Maybe it means that you're going to be put into a higher class," spoke Frank, with a smile.

"Or that we're going to get half-holiday Fridays," said Bob.

"Or that Jed Burr is going to leave school," put in Sammy, with a wry grimace.

"Huh! no fear of Jed leaving," said Bob. "He'll stick on till he's too old to stick any longer, and pester the life out of every one he meets."

"Are you afraid of him, Bob?" asked Sammy, slyly.

"Afraid?" cried Bob. "I guess not! He's just like a gnat or a hornet."

"I'm not going to play with him," said Sammy.

"You'll have to, in the football game," replied Frank.

"Well, I won't at other times. He got me in trouble last term in a mean, sneaky way, and I won't give him a chance again. Tell you one thing, fellows."

"And what's that, Sammy?"

"If Jed Burr tries any of his sly tricks on me this term, he'll find me ready for him."

"How ready, Sammy?" asked Bob, with a sharp look at his comrade.

"That's a secret," chuckled Sammy. "But you wait and see."

"There's the half-past bell," sang out Bob. "Let's hurry and see what's going on before school begins."

The Fairview schoolhouse was about half a mile from Bob's home. He, Frank and Sammy lived near together. They had taken the bluff road lining Rainbow Lake. Just beyond the curve they were turning, the schoolhouse would come into view.

Bob broke into a run, swinging his books at the end of a strap gaily. Just past the stone wall and the line of trees shutting out the view, he halted dead short.

"What's he staring at, I wonder?" said Frank.

"Don't know. Let's find out," replied Sammy, and both hurried on.

"The mischief!" shouted Sammy.

He, too, halted. Frank joined them, and the three lads for a moment stood looking in wonder down the slanting road.

"It's a runaway automobile," cried Sammy.

"And a boy in it," added Frank.

"Whew! there's a tumble," shouted Bob, dancing up and down in a state of great excitement.

Not fifty feet away from them, near a vacant house, an automobile was coming towards them. A boy in its front seat seemed to have been trying to turn around. When Bob and his chums first caught sight of the machine, they saw that this boy was trying to stop it, but he did not seem to know how to go about the task.

In some way he had gotten mixed up on the steering gear, and the auto crossed the road sideways. As it reached the edge of the road, its front wheels struck a fallen tree. As the auto passed over the log, there was a big jolt. The boy in the machine was lifted up in his seat, and either jumped or fell flat into a great puddle of mud.

"Frank," cried Bob, "see where it's headed!"

"Say, it's a goner!" gasped Sammy.

Frank was the only one of the three who knew much about an automobile, and that was very little. An uncle of his owned a machine, and he had spent a day or two lately with his relatives at Fairview. Frank had gone on several runs with his uncle. He had noticed how his relative had handled the automobile, but in a general way only. As he ran towards the machine now, he hardly knew what he should do to stop it.

The runaway automobile was not going very fast. It was

the way it was headed that made Frank realize that something must be done. The machine was tearing up the earth, and running against rocks, and bumping past trees, directly at the edge of the bluff road.

"If it keeps on that way," said Frank to himself, "it will go over the edge of the bluff."

If that happened the auto would be wrecked. It would roll over and over down quite a steep slant until it reached Rainbow Lake.

"Don't get in! don't get in!" shouted Sammy, his eyes nearly bolting out of his head, as he saw no chance to stop the auto.

Frank could hardly have jumped into the machine, it wobbled about so. But he reached its side, ran along with it, and then jumped to the step.

Once Frank had been with his uncle when his auto, turning a sharp curve, nearly ran into a great load of hay blocking the road. Frank remembered that his uncle had acted as quick as lightning. He had shot out his hand and grasped the side brake, at the same time turning off the power at the wheel.

"That was a narrow graze," his uncle had told him, as the machine stopped short.

He called it "killing the engine." All this was in Frank's mind as he now gave the brake of the runaway auto a quick wrench and at the same time shoved back the controls on the steering wheel. As a sway of the auto threw him off the step, the chug! chug! of the machine stopped, and so did the auto itself.

The big red car had one wheel wedged between two rocks. Frank breathed pretty hard as he noticed that had the auto gone ten feet farther, it would have toppled over the cliff.

"Oh, say, you've done a big thing," panted Sammy, running up to the spot.

"I'm glad it didn't go over the bluff," said Frank.

He might well say this. As he glanced down the slant, Frank almost became frightened. Three little huts, where some fishermen and their families lived, were right in the course the auto might take. Just now some small children were playing near one of the huts.

"Say, if it hit those houses—say, if it smashed over those children—" began Sammy, in a gasp.

"Where is Bob?" asked Frank.

"He's helping the fellow who tumbled out of the auto," explained Sammy.

Frank turned around, to see Bob back at the spot where the boy in the auto had taken his tumble into the mud puddle.

Bob had helped the boy out of the water and mire. Just now he was rubbing the mud from his coat with some dry grass. The victim of the accident was mopping his face with a handkerchief.

"Here comes the man who owns the automobile, I guess," said Sammy.

Frank saw a man rush down the road from the direction of the vacant house. He was in a great hurry, and excited. He shouted some words at Bob and his companion, and, passing Frank and Sammy, gasping for breath, ran to the automobile.

As he looked it over and saw that he could get it back into the roadway without risk or damage, he walked up to the boys.

"One of you stopped that machine," he said, glancing from Frank to Sammy.

"It was Frank, mister," said Sammy, pointing to his chum.

"I haven't got much with me," spoke the man, his voice trembling.

First he shook Frank's hand warmly. Then he groped in his pocket and drew out a bright new silver dollar.

"You take that till I see you again," he said.

"No, no," replied Frank. "I don't want any pay for doing the little I did."

"Little!" cried the man, pressing the coin on Frank. "That machine is worth three thousand dollars, and you saved it."

"Well, I'm glad if I did," said Frank.

"If that boy back there was my boy," spoke the man, with a look at the lad who had tumbled out of the auto, "I'd either teach him how to run the machine, or handcuff him when he was aboard."

"Oh, isn't he your boy?" inquired Sammy.

"No, I'm his father's chauffeur."

They all went up to the mud puddle. Bob was helping his companion get cleaned up in as friendly a way as if they had been chums for years.

"Why," shouted Sammy, in blank surprise, "it's the fat boy!"

"So it is," replied Frank, in a wondering tone.

"Hello," spoke the boy who had tumbled out of the auto. "You fellows here, too?"

Bob's face, as were the faces of the others, was set in a broad smile. They all had good reason to remember "the fat boy."

"Yes, it's me," said the victim of the accident, rubbing some dirt out of one ear. "Is the machine all right, Buxton?"

"Yes, the machine is all right," replied the man; "but ten

feet more, and it would have been all wrong. What was you trying to do with it, anyhow?"

"I thought I would turn it around. I only touched one little handle, and then the foot-plate, and the pesky auto wouldn't go straight at all. Yes, fellows," smiled the speaker at Frank and Sammy, "I'm like the bad penny, turned up again."

"I'm glad to see you in Fairview," said Frank. "How are you getting on at the academy?"

"Oh, I've quit there," said Tom Chubb, otherwise "the fat boy."

"How is that?"

"They said I wasn't far enough along to keep up with the class."

"I see."

"You know I don't know much," said the fat boy, frankly. "The fellows all made fun of me. Then they got mad. I couldn't hit back when they fought me, I was so fat. Well, all I could do was to get them in a corner and fall on them."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Sammy.

"That's pretty good," chuckled Bob.

"Father is thinking of coming to Fairview to live for the summer," went on the fat boy. "I think we'll take that vacant house Buxton was just looking at."

"Why, then, you may come to our school?" said Sammy.

"I reckon I will," replied the fat boy. "I hope so, for I like you fellows. Say," and he grinned from ear to ear, "remember how you met me in the mountains that night?"

"Of course we do," smiled Frank.

"How you told me how to get even with the students who hazed me? Well, I did it great and grand, and I'll never forget you for that."

In a few minutes the chauffeur got the automobile back into the road. The fat boy waved his hand to the boys until the machine turned out of sight.

"Well, who ever thought of meeting that fellow again!" laughed Frank.

"He's a comical one," said Bob.

"He asked if we remembered that night in the mountains," said Sammy. "Huh! as if we'd ever forget it."

Each one of the boys was busy for the moment thinking of that same night in the mountains. It had brought back some adventure that had made the long vacation a time of great delight to them.

Those of my young readers who have read the first book of the present series, entitled: "Fairview Boys Afloat and Ashore; Or, The Young Crusoes of Pine Island," will recall the exciting but jolly time Frank, Bob and Sammy had when the sail-boat *Puff* was wrecked on Pine Island.

The three boys had been allowed to make a one day's cruise on Rainbow Lake. They had, however, gotten caught in a big storm, and were marooned on Pine Island for several days.

All the time Sammy Brown's busy head was full of misers' hoards and hidden treasure. In the second book of this series, called "Fairview Boys on Eagle Mountain; Or, Sammy Brown's Treasure Hunt," Sammy induced his two loyal companions to go with him to Eagle Mountain in search of a fancied lot of treasure.

The boys had found no treasure. However, they ran across a stolen horse and got a twenty-five-dollar reward for returning it to its owner.

It was during the first night of their camping out in the mountains that they came across the fat boy, Tom Chubb.

Some school chums of his at a distant academy had made

Tom believe they were going to let him help them cut down a bee tree. They induced him to lug along a heavy log chain nearly ten miles. Then they scurried away, leaving him to guess the trick that had been played upon him, and to find his way back home alone at midnight the best way he could.

Bob and his friends had come across Tom, and had given him food and shelter for the night. Bob had told him how to get even with the schemers. This was to buy two pails of fine comb honey from a farmer, and march back with it to the academy just as if nothing had happened.

"He did it, fellows," said Bob now. "He says he gave the whole school a royal treat, never told a word as to how he got the honey, and crowded over the fellows who played the trick till they were as mum as turtles."

"Well, he's a pretty good fellow," said Frank. "I hope he comes to our school."

"So do I," echoed Sammy. "Here we are."

A turn in the road brought them in full sight of the village schoolhouse. They hurried forward eagerly. There was always a novelty in the first day at school. They looked over the bright active scene before them with interest.

"Pretty near the same old crowd," said Sammy. "See, there's Nellie Somers."

"Hum!" spoke Bob, slyly, "how is it you always manage to see her first, Sammy?"

"Don't get smart, Bob," cried Sammy. "Oh, there's little Benny Lane."

"And Jed Burr, big as life," added Bob. "Look at him, Frank. I should think he'd get tired of that same old trick of his."

"What trick, Bob?" asked Frank.

"Watch him and see."

Their eyes were fixed on a boy who was moving from

place to place on the playground. This was Jed Burr. He was known as the bully of the school, and, except by a few chums of his own kind, was not very well liked.

As a new arrival came upon the playground, he would go up to him and put out his hand as if to welcome him. Just now an innocent-faced little fellow put out his hand in response. Jed seized it, gave the boy a quick jerk, and sent him flat on his face with a great laugh.

Jed spied the three friends as they came up, and hurried towards them.

"Look out, fellows," warned Sammy.

"Oh, we know his tricks," replied Bob.

"You know, when he can't catch a fellow with the hand-shake," said Sammy, "he runs up to him when he isn't looking and gives him a slap on the back that nearly knocks the breath out of him."

"Yes, and he calls that fun," said Frank.

"I hope he tries it on me," said Sammy, with a chuckle.

"Hello!" said Bob, with a sharp look at Sammy, "what are you up to?"

"Never mind. You just watch me if Jed Burr tries it," said Sammy.

"Why, hello, Frank!" spoke Jed, reaching out his hand.

"Fine, thank you," smiled Frank, and he shook his own hand.

"Yes, Jed, never better," laughed Bob, putting his hand behind him.

Sammy had turned clear around, facing the schoolhouse. Jed saw this, and his eye brightened. He even drew up his coat-sleeve, winked at Frank and Bob, stole up behind Sammy, and, bringing his hand across Sammy's back, gloated out:

"Hello, Sammy Brown—wow! ouch!"

A wonderful change came over the face of the school bully. He drew back his hand as if it had touched red-hot iron. He wrung it with a pained look on his face.

Sammy turned around, as cool as a cucumber.

"Why, Jed, what's the matter?" he asked, innocently.

Jed Burr grumbled out something, stuck his hand in his pocket, and strode away with a scowl on his face.

"What have you been up to, Sammy?" asked Frank, half guessing.

"Oh, nothing but wearing a pin cushion between my shoulders," chuckled Sammy in reply.

Just then the bell rang, and the scholars began to flock into the little schoolhouse.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL

FRANK HAVEN piloted Benny Lane among the crowding scholars. The little fellow used a crutch, and some of the rougher boys nearly swept him off his feet.

"It seems like home again, doesn't it, Sammy?" whispered Bob, as they took their places at their old desks.

There was the usual hum and bustle that always took place on the first day of school.

Miss Williams, the teacher, welcomed all the boys and girls with a pleasant smile. She gave the scholars time to settle themselves in their seats before she called the school to order.

When she finally tapped the little bell on her desk everybody became quiet, except Jed Burr. He was leaning over towards Sammy's desk, mumbling out something about getting even with him. Miss Williams tapped the desk sharply with her ruler, and looked right at Jed. He scowled at Sammy and then at the teacher.

"There will be no school this afternoon," began Miss Williams, and there was a great rustling about, and everybody grew eager and smiling.

"The school board will meet here this afternoon," went on the teacher, "so you will have a half holiday."

"Hurrah!" cheered Sammy to himself.

Bob touched his foot with his own and chuckled.

"This morning you will all come up in your turn and get

your classes and lists for new books," added Miss Williams. "The new scholars will come first, please."

Minnie Grey, a shy little girl whose folks were poor, and who carried milk and eggs around to sell mornings and evenings, got her list of books.

She sat right in front of Bob. He could look over her shoulder and read the list. When he got his own he wrote and slipped her a note.

"dear Minie," it read, "I have got all the books you need, and I am threw with them. You can have them after school."

Minnie had been looking over her list very solemnly. The cost of the books seemed a small fortune to her. She studied over Bob's hasty note and her eyes sparkled. Then she wrote on her slate, and held it up so Bob could read the words:

"You are a reel gude boy."

Jed Burr, who was watching everything Bob did, snickered. One of his crowd said "cluck-cluck!" in a whisper. Another one pretended to pull Minnie's braid of hair as if it were a cow's tail, and said "Moo-oo."

It made Jed madder than ever when he found he would have to go over the studies of the last term. Bob, Frank and Sammy were pleased to find that they were promoted to the third class, and would all have the same studies.

Dave Duncan, who was a leader with the best crowd of boys, kept busy till recess time making up a list of the football teams. It got whispered about what he was up to, and most of the boys were thinking a good deal more of the coming sport than of their studies.

Miss Williams went home at recess time for some reports she had left in her room. Most of the boys stayed in the schoolhouse, for Dave was telling of the make-up of the new teams.

Jed Burr had a good deal to say about it, but Dave settled it all without his advice. When they had arranged their plans there were a few minutes left for play. The boys began chasing each other about the room.

Bob, in dodging a boy who was chasing him, pulled open a door of a little storeroom just behind the teacher's desk. He was intent on hiding, but the other saw his move. Bob only slipped inside the storeroom, and then sprang out again.

Several times Jed Burr brushed by Sammy and Bob, and seemed to take a pleasure in bumping up hard against them. Bob paid no attention to his ugly ways.

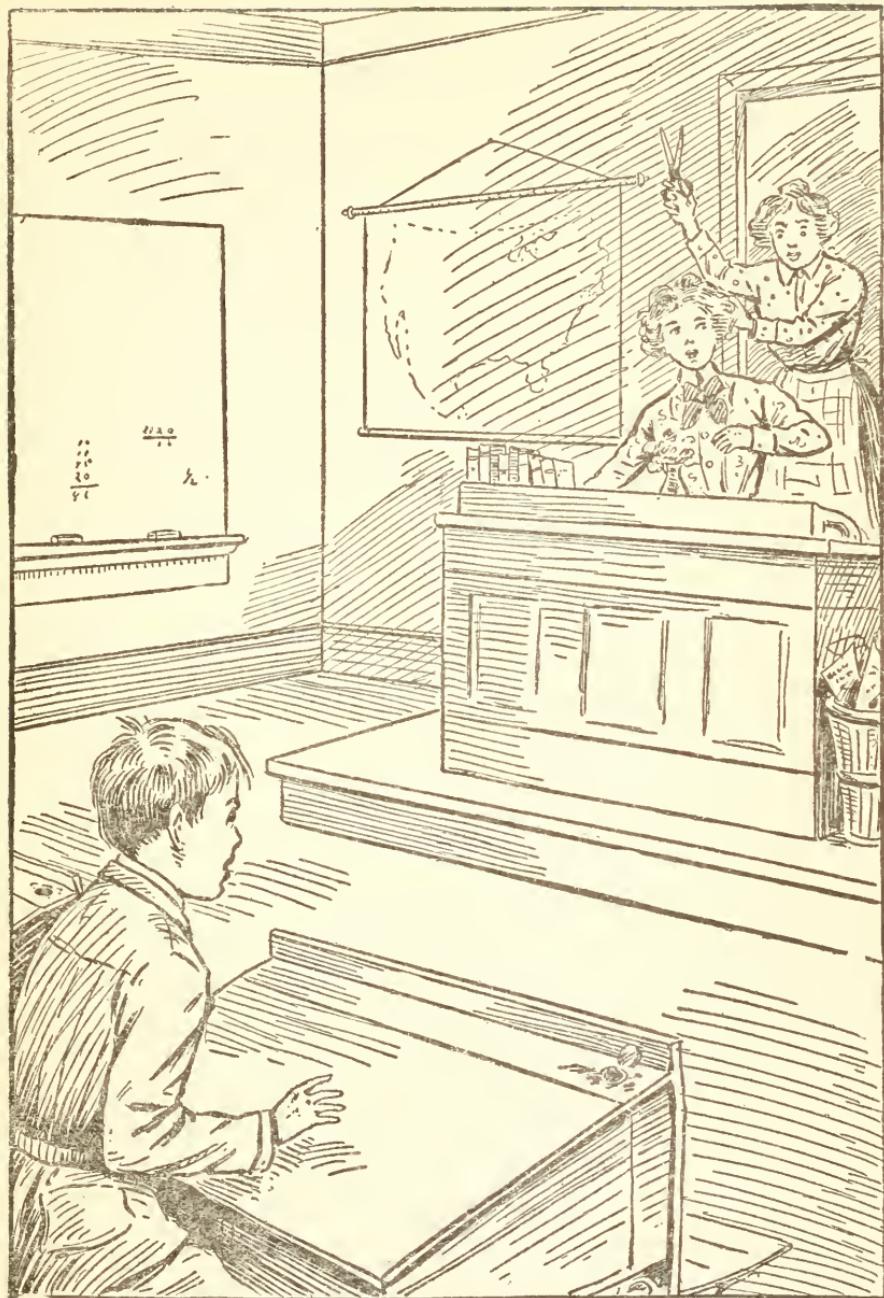
Then the teacher came back, and recess was over. There was half an hour of practising on some school songs. After that Miss Williams gave out some writing exercises to be done at home.

She went to the little storeroom to fill an ink-well. Jed Burr threw a wad of paper at some girls as the teacher's back was turned. He jumped on his seat and was getting ready to go through what he thought was some smart antics, when Miss Williams cried out sharply, and came back into the schoolroom.

"Who pushed the large bottle of ink off the table in the storeroom?" she asked, sternly.

No one replied. There was utter silence as she looked from face to face.

"Some one did," went on Miss Williams. "It lies broken on the floor, and the ink is all over the room." And necks were craned to notice her black footmarks from the storeroom.



*Bob Held His Breath, for It Was a
Startling Sight*

Miss Williams waited a moment or two for some one to speak. Then she asked:

"Has any one of the scholars been in the storeroom this morning?"

"Yes, Bob Bouncer," said a quick voice.

Bob knew that it was Jed Burr who had spoken. He flushed a little, and rose to his feet.

"I was in the storeroom, but it was only for a second, Miss Williams," he said.

"Then you broke the bottle of ink?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't," said Bob.

"You must tell the truth, Bob," said Miss Williams. "If you broke it by accident, it could not be helped."

"I didn't break it at all. I wasn't near the table. I wasn't over a foot inside the room, Miss Williams."

There was a sniff and a sneer. The word "stuff" was heard all over the room. Miss Williams looked very sharply at Bob. Then she touched the bell, with the words:

"School is dismissed. Bob, you may remain."

Bob looked pretty glum as the other scholars trooped out. Jed Burr chuckled as he passed him. Little Minnie Grey was in tears. Frank was angry, and he hurried out after Jed to give him a piece of his mind.

Miss Williams sat down at her desk and paid no attention to the lonely scholar left in the room. She knew Bob to be a good boy, but she knew, too, that he was proud and stubborn, and never liked to be censured before the whole school. She hoped that silence and thought would lead Bob to confess, if he had really spilled the ink.

Bob heard the boys in the distance shouting and playing. It made him more gloomy than ever to think how they were planning for the football game that afternoon, and he was shut out from it.

Miss Williams went on quietly writing at the desk. Bob got tired looking around the room. He dropped his head upon his arms and tried not to feel mean. Miss Williams thought he was sulking, and did not disturb him. Suddenly Bob raised his head quickly.

"Sit still, dearie," spoke a strange voice. "Sit still now, or I'll stick you."

Bob's eyes opened to their widest. The door of the storeroom was now open. A woman had come from it. She had stolen up behind the school teacher without being seen or heard by Miss Williams.

As she spoke the words that caused Bob to look up, she grasped the long back hair of the school teacher in one hand. In the other she waved a long sharp-pointed pair of scissors.

Miss Williams tried to turn around, but the woman kept a firm hold on the coils of her hair.

"Why, Mary," spoke the teacher, turning pale, but trying to act calmly, "how did you come here?"

Bob also knew the woman at a glance. She was called Simple Mary. Some years before, her husband and child had been drowned in a great storm on Rainbow Lake. The shock drove the poor creature out of her mind.

Since then she had had frequent spells, when the authorities had to shut her up in an asylum. Then she would be very quiet for weeks at a time, when she would roam about the country. Some kind-hearted people always gave her work or shelter.

Bob held his breath, for it was quite startling to see Mary waving the scissors. Her eyes looked wild, and she was not in one of her quiet moods, that was certain.

"I've been here hiding in the storeroom since before school," began Mary, with a sly laugh.

"Why, what for?" asked Miss Williams.

"To wait for you."

"For me, Mary?" said the teacher, as calmly as she could.

"Yes, ma'am. You see, I expect my little child home to-night. You know, she has been away at school for nearly four years."

"Indeed, Mary," replied Miss Williams, humoring the delusion of the poor mother. "That will be very nice, indeed."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm making her a beautiful doll, and I need some hair for its head. You have got such lovely hair, I want it. Now, if you hold still I won't hurt you, but if you don't I will have to stick you."

Mary's eyes glared as she said this. Miss Williams was very much frightened, but she sat perfectly still.

"If you will come home with me, Mary, I will give you some hair I have that was cut off when I was sick."

"No, ma'am, I want this hair," replied Mary, stubbornly. "Oh, how pretty it will look on the doll!" she cried.

Bob made up his mind that it was time for him to act. He saw that the witless woman would either cut off Miss Williams' hair, or hurt her with the scissors.

"It's lucky I'm here," thought Bob, "even if I was kept in for nothing."

Bob stooped low in the shadow of the desks, and crept down the aisle. As he got clear of the last desk, Mary pulled back the head of the teacher. Miss Williams uttered a faint scream.

"I don't want to hurt you, but you must keep still," cried Mary, quite angrily.

Bob reached her side in a quick dash. He reached out so strongly that he managed to wrench the scissors from her

hand. Giving them a fling away over beyond the last row of desks, Bob got a firm grip on Mary's wrist.

Miss Williams saw what he had done and gave a glad cry.

She at once seized the other wrist of Mary. Then both held her a prisoner.

Mary got very wild. She turned on Bob and her eyes were blazing.

"You bad boy!" she cried. "When I get my scissors again I'll cut your fingers off."

"Now be sensible, Mary," pleaded Miss Williams gently with the struggling woman. "You don't want me to send for the constable and have you taken back to the poor farm, do you?"

This terrified and finally quieted the mad woman.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried. "Please don't do that; please don't!"

"See here, Mary," said Bob, "you know my mother?"

"Yes, I do, Bob," answered the woman, nodding.

"She's your friend, isn't she?"

"Yes, indeed! She gave me a week's work and a nice room all to myself last spring."

"Well, you come with me, Mary," said Bob, "and we'll go up to the house. My mother has been making a silk quilt, and I'm sure she has some pretty pieces she'll give you to fix up your doll."

"Oh, won't that be fine!" cried Mary, in childish glee. "Yes, yes," she said; "take me there right away, will you?"

They felt safe now to let go of Mary. She clapped her hands in great glee, and seemed to have forgotten about cutting off the teacher's hair.

"Mary," asked Miss Williams, "have you been hiding in the storeroom ever since school began?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, and long before that."

"Did you tip over a bottle of ink in there?"

"I didn't mean to, but I did," said Mary.

"Well, never mind; it was an accident. I am very sorry, Bob, I suspected you of hiding the truth, and kept you in."

"It's good you did, the way things have turned out, isn't it now, Miss Williams?" laughed Bob.

"I shall tell the scholars that I was in the wrong," said the teacher.

"Oh, you're never much in the wrong," said Bob, gallantly. "All the fellows know you're always fair and good to us."

"Thank you, Bob."

"Come on. Let us run," spoke Mary, and Bob let her take his hand. "Remember, now, I'm to have some of those fine silk patches?"

"I am sure my mother will give them to you, Mary," replied Bob.

Some of the Burr crowd hooted and jeered as they saw Bob with Simple Mary. Sammy ran after him, and Bob explained matters to his chum.

"Be sure to get back here by one o'clock, Bob," called out Sammy, as they parted.

"Is there going to be a game?" asked Bob.

"Yes, a fine one, and our crowd needs you."

"I'll be on hand," promised Bob.

Mary chatted in her childish, innocent way. When they reached the Bouncer home Mary sat down on the grass to pet a little kitten. This gave Bob a chance to get to his mother and explain how matters were.

Mrs. Bouncer came out, in her pleasant, kindly way, and took Mary into the house. Bob knew that his mother would do all that was right for the poor lady, and set about his noon-time chores.

He had his lunch and then went up to his den to get some of his football togs. When he came down his mother told him that the village sewing circle was to meet at the house that afternoon. They would arrange for the comfort and safety of Mary in some way, she said.

As Bob started from the house he saw Mary seated in the little summer-house, looking over some pretty pieces of silk like a pleased child, and singing to herself in a happy, contented way.

"I've got lots of time," said Bob to himself, as he walked down the street, "but I'll get to the field early, so as to have a talk about the game with Dave."

"Oh, Bob! Bob!" called out a hurried voice, as he was passing a neat little cottage, setting somewhat back from the street.

Its owner and tenant, Miss Simmons, the prim old maid of the village, came out to the gate. She looked worried.

"Bob, will you do me a favor?" she asked, in an excited way.

"I'll be glad to, Miss Simmons," replied Bob.

"Well, my little nephew Walter has been staying with me for a few days. He has been missing for over an hour. I thought he was playing with some neighbors' children, but I find that none of them has seen him."

"Oh, he's safe somewhere," said Bob, seeing how nervous and frightened the old maid was.

"Won't you please try and find him?"

"Of course I will," replied Bob, promptly. "I'll look myself, and if I don't find him I'll get the other boys to join in the search."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," said Miss Simmons.

Bob turned around to start down the street, when he chanced to look ahead of him.

"Why, Miss Simmons, there is Walter now," he said.

"Oh, so it is," cried the old maid, starting down the street.

A dusty, tired-out little youngster came towards them. Bob walked on with Miss Simmons, until they reached him.

"You bad little boy!" cried Miss Simmons, seizing Walter by the arms. "Where have you ever been?"

"I've been playing postman, that's all," replied the little fellow.

He perked up in a proud sort of a way as he said this, Bob thought.

"Postman?" repeated Miss Simmons, with a sniff.

"Yes, Aunty."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I've been giving out letters all along the street, 'way, 'way down it," replied the little urchin, with a slow, long sweep of his chubby little arm.

"What letters? Where did you get them?" asked Miss Simmons, sharply.

"Just out of the box on your bureau, Aunty," was the innocent reply.

"Out of—my box—on—the bureau!" almost shrieked Miss Simmons, turning pale.

"Yes, Aunty."

"And what did you do with them?" cried Miss Simmons, greatly excited.

"I passed them out, just as our postman does, to all the houses."

"O-oh! o-oh!" screamed the old maid.

Then she fell against the fence as if overcome, and slipped to the ground. She wrung her hands, and screamed outright. The amazed Bob saw her roll over on the grass in a fit of hysterics.

CHAPTER III

THE LOST LETTERS

BOB hardly knew what hysterics were. He thought that Miss Simmons was in a fit.

"Don't get scared, Walter," he said to the little boy, who was frightened and began to cry.

Bob jumped over the fence and ran to the pump in the yard. A cup hung on a nail. He filled this with cool, fresh water, and ran back to Miss Simmons. She was sitting up by this time and moaning, but she saw him coming.

"Don't throw that water on me," she said. "I'm only faint. Let me drink. Oh, those letters! those letters!"

Miss Simmons got to her feet, and at once fell against the fence again. Bob wondered why she was so stirred up.

"I wouldn't get so excited if I were you," he said. "What about the letters, Miss Simmons?"

"Oh, I can't tell. That is—they are very precious—I mean important," stammered the old maid, covering her face with her hands.

"Maybe I can get them back for you."

"Oh, could you? Can you?" cried the woman, eagerly.

"I can try," said Bob. "Were there many of them?"

"Just twenty, Bob," replied Miss Simmons.

"Twenty? Were they all addressed to you?"

"Yes, years ago. Oh, I must get them back at once, Bob—at once," and she acted as if she was going into another fit.

"Maybe people will bring them back to you," said Bob.

"But they would read them first. Oh, I should die if they did! I would leave town. Everybody would be laughing at me."

"What would they laugh for?" asked honest Bob.

Miss Simmons did not reply to this. She only wrung her hands and looked worried to death.

"Oh, Bob, please try and get those letters back," she begged of him. "I'll pay you well."

"I don't want any pay," said Bob. "Here, Walter, you come with me and show me what you did with those letters."

Bob caught hold of Walter's hands, but the little fellow hung back.

"I don't want to go," he whimpered.

"Why not?" asked Bob.

"I'm all tired out."

"I'll carry you on my back part of the way," promised Bob, "and I'll make you a fine kite next Saturday."

"Oh, goody! I'll go, I'll go," cried Walter.

"Now, Miss Simmons, you go in the house and get some rest and quiet," said Bob.

"Do you think you can get the letters back?" asked Miss Simmons, anxiously.

"Don't worry now," said Bob. "I'm going to do the best I can, and, you see, I stand a good show, getting after them so quickly."

Miss Simmons went into the house, and Bob hoisted Walter to his back.

"Now then," he said, "you must tell me just what you did with those letters."

"Yes, I will," replied the little fellow, greatly delighted at the ride and the promise of a kite. "You see, I went down this street to the next corner."

"Yes," nodded Bob.

"Then I turned and went down one side of the next street and back the other."

"What did you do with the letters?"

"I went up on the stoops, just like the postman, and left a letter on each step."

"Did you knock or ring the bell?"

"Oh, no."

"Why not? The postman does."

"Yes, I know that," said little Walter, "but I did it as a s'prise."

"Oh, a surprise?"

"Yes, s'prise. That's the first house," said Walter, pointing around the corner as they reached the next street.

Bob lowered Walter to a hitching-block, and went up the walk leading to the house before which he had halted.

"That's good," he said to himself, as he saw the end of an old envelope sticking out from half-way under the door.

"One of the twenty letters, anyway," added Bob, placing the envelope in his pocket, as he read the address of Miss Simmons upon it.

At the second house he saw no letter lying around the porch. A lady came to the door. She knew Bob.

"I am looking for a letter Miss Simmons' little nephew left on your doorstep," he said.

"Oh, yes. I saw him come in, and I thought it was a circular. Then I noticed Miss Simmons' name on it, and guessed the little fellow was up to some boyish prank. Here it is. I was going to return it to her."

Thus Bob went down one side of the street. At every place but one he found the letters where they had been left. At the one place a boy had found the letter, and carried it

as far as the street, and threw it into the grass, where Bob now found it.

By the time Bob had gone up the other side of the street nearly to its end, he had gathered up sixteen of the lost letters. There was only one house left. It was a big residence. A rich family named Dunbar lived there. Bob knew they were still absent at some summer resort.

"Did you leave any of the letters here, Walter?" he asked of his little charge.

"Oh, yes, all of the rest of them."

"How many?"

"Three—no, four, I guess," replied Walter. "You see, it's a big house, and I thought a good many people would live in it."

"Where did you put the letters?" asked Bob.

"I threw them right up on the porch."

"I don't see them," said Bob.

The porch was sheltered by vines. Bob walked around the yard. He knew that no one occupied the house just now. There was quite a breeze, and he thought that maybe the wind had blown the letters out into the garden.

Bob looked all about the lot. It slanted at the rear to a little creek. He noticed papers and leaves all along this, but he did not come across the missing letters.

"They must have blown away," he said to himself, "unless they're on the other end of the porch. I'll look there."

Bob went up to the steps. He paused, a little surprised, as he noticed, stretched out on a rustic settee in its shade, a shabbily-dressed man he had never seen in Fairview before.

"Hello, mister," spoke Bob.

"Why, hello, lad," replied the man, getting up and looking Bob over in a sharp, quick way. "Belong here?"

"No, I don't," said Bob.

"Neither do I. You see, I am tramping it through town. Sort of hot and dusty. Nobody living here, so I thought no one would grudge me a trifle of rest."

"No, indeed," said Bob, glancing all about the porch.

"Looking for something, lad?" asked the tramp, noticing this.

"Why, yes, I was," answered Bob.

"What was it?"

"Some letters. That little boy out at the gate got hold of some letters of his aunt, Miss Simmons. She lives down the street. He played postman, and left them at a lot of houses."

"Oh," said the man, slowly, as if thinking hard, "that's it, eh? Valuable letters?"

"Why, I don't suppose so," replied Bob. "They were old letters that Miss Simmons had kept for a good many years. She is dreadfully upset about losing them."

"Say," grinned the man, "I'll bet they're old love-letters."

"Maybe," replied Bob. "Anyhow, there were twenty of them."

"Twenty?"

"Yes."

"Did you find any of them?"

"All except four," replied Bob. "Little Walter says he left those on this porch here. You didn't see them, did you, mister?"

"Me? No," said the man, in a sort of a shifty way.

"I thought you might, having been here probably when the little fellow left them."

"Oh, I was snoozing," declared the man. "Where do you suppose they went to?"

"I think they have blown away among the litter down by the creek," explained Bob.

"Yes, that seems likely," said the man.

He slouched down the steps and loitered about the gate as Bob took little Walter away towards the home of Miss Simmons. As he turned into her yard he happened to glance back. The man he had just left stood in the middle of the sidewalk, watching where he went.

"Did you find them—oh, did you find them?" asked Miss Simmons, anxiously, as Bob came up the steps.

"Most of them, Miss Simmons," replied Bob, handing her sixteen of the letters.

"There are four of them missing," said the old maid, counting the letters.

"Yes, ma'am. I know where Walter left them, though."

"Where, Bob?"

"At the Dunbar house."

"There is no one at home there now."

"I know it, but the letters were gone. Tell you, Miss Simmons, I feel pretty sure the wind blew them across the yard and in among a great lot of litter near the creek."

"Oh, I hope so! Oh, I hope no one will ever find them!" sighed Miss Simmons. "I haven't got any change in the house, Bob, but when you come by again stop in, and I'll give you ten cents."

"Don't think of it," replied Bob. "When I have time, Miss Simmons, I'll make another search for those four missing letters."

"You're a good boy, Bob."

"Thank you, Miss Simmons."

"And—and, Bob, please don't tell anybody I took on so about those letters."

"Oh, no, ma'am, I won't," promised Bob.

He went on his way, whistling. The man he had met at the Dunbar house had gotten out of sight by this time. Bob supposed he was some tramp passing through the village. He forgot all about him, and Miss Simmons, too, as he hurried towards the schoolhouse.

There was a fine meadow right near the school grounds. This had been chosen as a favorite spot for sport. The baseball and football teams of the town played there regularly. It was marked off for both games, and there were some benches at one corner of the field. At the other end there was a tennis court.

"Those letters have made me late," said Bob to himself, as he passed the schoolhouse and saw the crowd of boys already gathered on the field.

Dave Duncan was just telling off the school teams for football. There was some squabbling, as usual, on the part of Jed Burr.

"I'm not going to play till my right tackle comes," he declared.

"Oh, we can't wait for that," said Dave.

"You've got to. You ain't running my crowd."

"I don't want to," said Dave, "but if you make me the manager I've got to have some say, haven't I? We'll only practise this afternoon, and get in trim for the real game Saturday."

"All right," grumbled Jed.

There was a merry boyish scramble as the game began. Not much attention was paid to the rules, and that made it better than ever. Bob was quick and active.

The boys had been playing for about twenty minutes, when a kick past goal meant three hand-running for his side. He had got the football, and was in position for a splendid play, when he saw Jed making for him to spoil it.

"No fair!" shouted Sammy, Bob and some others.

Jed paid no attention to this. He ran forward all the faster. This made Bob hurry. He gave the ball a wild kick.

"Hurrah!"

"Ya-ah! three times and out!"

Bob, with a good deal of pleasure, watched the leather sphere swing past Jed. Then, with a little start, he stared hard as it landed.

A weazened old man was making a short cut across the end of the field. The ball landed directly against his stomach.

It must have been going with some force, for at once the man doubled up like a jack-knife.

He fell flat to the ground, his hat flying in one direction and his cane in another. Sammy ran up to Bob with a look of dismay on his face.

"I say, Bob," he spoke hurriedly, "we're in for it now—it's old Silas Dolby!"

CHAPTER IV

SOMETHING OF A MYSTERY

“THE mischief!” cried Frank, as he joined Bob and Sammy.

Jed Burr and his crowd thought it was funny to see the old man flounder around.

“Buffer!” cried one of them.

“Hey, want a back-stop?” echoed another.

“He’s smashed something,” spoke a third.

“Seems to be his watch,” reported the first speaker.

“You’re in a fix, Bob, this time, sure,” said Sammy.

“I’m sorry it’s Mr. Dolby,” replied Bob. “He doesn’t like any of us any too well.”

Silas Dolby was a miserly old man who had few friends in Fairview, and he was tight-fisted, cross, and too shrewd to please honest people.

Bob, Frank and Sammy were “down in his bad books,” as the saying goes. It was none of their fault, but rather a merit. While camping in the mountains on Sammy Brown’s treasure search, they had found a pocketbook.

This they gave to Frank’s father, who looked it over. It belonged to Silas Dolby, who had lost it, and was full of papers. Among them Mr. Haven found some notes that should have been given to a poor widow in the village, the mother of little, crippled Benny Lane. It seemed that her husband had paid money on a mortgage on their little home to old Dolby. After Mr. Lane died the miser said

nothing about this. He was going to turn Mrs. Lane out of her house. When Mr. Haven told of the hidden notes, they made old Silas Dolby turn the house over to its rightful owner. This made Mrs. Lane a happy woman, but after that Mr. Dolby snarled and glared at the boys whenever he came near them.

"Hold on, Bob, I'll try and explain to Mr. Dolby," said Frank, as Bob started towards the prostrate man.

"No, I'm going to face the music myself," replied Bob.

The other boys had run forward to where the old miser was just getting to his feet. His face was wrathy, and he scowled at the crowd.

"Here is your cane, Mr. Dolby," said Frank, picking up the stick and offering it to its owner.

"And here's your hat," added Sammy.

"Who threw that ball at me?" roared the old miser.

"Bob Bouncer kicked it," said Jed Burr.

"Oh, it was you, was it?" snarled the angry old man, making a lunge with his cane. Bob stood his ground.

"Yes, Mr. Dolby," replied Bob, "but it was an accident."

"Bah!"

"I didn't know anybody was crossing the field."

"Bosh! That ball has lamed my chest. I don't know but what I'm hurt inside."

"Let us help you home, Mr. Dolby," said Frank.

"Get away!" shouted the old man, not much like a person very seriously injured. "See here, Bob Bouncer, I know your mean feelings towards me."

"I haven't any," declared Bob.

"Bah! Well, whether you have or not, who's going to pay for that?"

Mr. Dolby pointed down to the spot where he had fallen. A half-sunken stone marked a base. In falling, it seemed that

his watch had spilled out of his pocket. It had landed on the stone. There it lay, its case open and bent, and its glass face smashed in.

"It's too bad, I declare!" spoke Frank. "Mr. Dolby, we're awfully sorry you broke your watch."

"I didn't break it," snarled the perverse old man. "You fellows smashed it—Bob Bouncer did. Think it smart, don't you?"

"No, I don't," answered Bob, "for I didn't mean to do it."

"Well, I'll make you smart for it, never fear."

"Maybe the watch isn't much hurt," said Sammy.

"Hurt? It's ruined!" cried old Dolby. "A valuable old timepiece, too. Why, I wouldn't lose that watch for one hundred dollars."

"See here, Mr. Dolby," spoke Frank, somewhat angry at the way the old man talked, "we'll get the watch fixed for you."

"Huh! you'll have to."

"My father has bought out the Jones jewelry store, and put my uncle in charge. I'll tell him about the watch, and if you'll give it to me he'll mend it for you."

"Give it to you and never see it again?" sneered the old man. "Not much."

"Then fetch it down to the store, and my uncle will fix it."

Silas Dolby did not say much after this. He took up the watch, shook his cane at the boys, and went away grumbling to himself.

"I hope that watch won't cost much," said Bob.

"Well, I've got a dollar towards fixing it," said Frank. "The money the chauffeur gave us, you know."

"We'll all pitch in and work out the rest of it," said

Sammy, cheerfully, for he saw that Bob was rather glum over his bad luck.

The accident quite dampened their spirits, and they did not take much more interest in the game.

About three o'clock, as they were leaving the field, Dave Duncan came up to them.

"Hi, you fellows," he sang out in his usual lively fashion, "our crowd is in for a picnic to-night."

"Is that so?" asked Frank.

"Yes, we're to meet at the Cove at seven o'clock."

"A boating party, eh?" inquired Bob.

"No, we call it a clam bake, but, of course, there won't be many clams. We'll have a big bonfire, and some of the fellows are going to bring a lunch."

"Jolly," said Sammy. "I'll be there."

"So will I," added Bob.

"Count me in, Dave," said Frank.

He and Bob and Sammy started homewards. They were all thinking of the broken watch.

"I think I'll go around to the store and tell my uncle about that watch," said Frank.

"I'll go, too," said Sammy.

"I've got to go home for a bit," said Bob. "But I'll come around to your house in about half an hour."

"All right."

Bob went home. His mother at noon had asked him to call some time during the afternoon, to take a note to a lady living some distance from them. Bob got the note and delivered it. Then he started on his way to look for his chums.

As he came to the street where Miss Simmons lived, Bob continued down it.

"It's only a block out of my way," he said. "Maybe

something new has turned up about those letters. I'm curious to know."

Just as Bob got near the Simmons place, he paused and drew back in the shelter of a big oak tree.

"That's queer," he could not help saying, and he peered curiously at the gateway of the place. A man was just passing through it.

The lad stood stock still and stared as he saw that this man was the tramp he had caught lounging about the Dunbar place. The fellow was too much taken up with what he was about to notice Bob. Besides, he started from the gate in the opposite direction.

As he did so, Bob noticed that he was looking over some money in his hand. Bob caught sight of a green bank note, and heard some loose silver jingled. The man thrust this money into his pocket, and folded up a piece of paper that made Bob think of a note or a check.

"I don't understand that at all," spoke out Bob. "And I don't like it at all," he added, after a moment's thought. "I guess I'll see Miss Simmons."

Bob entered the yard. As he came up the steps of the porch he heard some one sobbing. Looking towards the other end of the porch he made out Miss Simmons.

She was seated in a porch rocker and looked very wretched. As she saw Bob she tried to hide her tears.

"Why, what is the matter, Miss Simmons?" asked the lad in a kindly way.

"Oh, nothing," replied the old maid. "You see, I have had a very trying afternoon."

"I suppose so," said Bob. "Miss Simmons, I just saw a man leave here. He's a stranger in Fairview, I think."

Miss Simmons looked quite startled at this. She flushed a little and clasped her hands nervously.

"Why—why, Bob, I guess he is," she stammered.

"Was he begging? I think he is a tramp."

"Yes, that's it," nodded the old maid, quickly.

"I thought I would stop in as I was going by," said Bob.
"I'll try and get time to look again for those four missing letters this afternoon, Miss Simmons."

"Oh, no, you needn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because they have been found," said Miss Simmons.
"See, I have them all now," and she drew aside her apron to show a package in her lap.

"Well, I'm awful glad you got them back," said Bob.

He was very much surprised, but Miss Simmons did not explain any further.

"I guess I'll go," he said, moving down the steps. "If I can help you in any way, Miss Simmons, please tell me."

"No, Bob," replied the old maid, "there is nothing you can do. I am greatly obliged for what you have done. I'll have a little change for you when I see you again."

Bob went away slowly. He did not at all like the looks of things.

"Sort of funny," he thought. "She has got those letters back, she says. How did she get them? I'll bet I know. That tramp found them."

Bob walked along, figuring out his own ideas.

"I feel pretty sure that tramp told me a story," he said to himself. "I was goose enough to tell him about the letters and Miss Simmons. He had the letters all the time he was pumping me on the porch of the Dunbar place. Then he came to Miss Simmons and made the poor woman pay a lot for them. How much, I wonder? I hope she wasn't foolish enough to let the fellow rob her."

Bob had promised Miss Simmons that he would say

nothing about the letters. A few minutes later he saw Frank and Sammy coming down the street.

"I wish I could tell them about Miss Simmons, and see what they think about it," he mused. "I can't do it, though, and keep my word. Hello, fellows, which way?" he hailed, as he came up to his chums.

"We're going up to Mr. Dolby's," said Sammy.

"What for?" asked Bob.

"My uncle told me to go up there and get that watch," explained Frank.

"To have it mended?"

"Yes, he says he'll do it for nothing for us."

"That's good!" cried Bob. "Come on, I'll go with you. What's that, Frank?" he asked, as he saw his friend put a key from his hand into his coat pocket.

"It's an extra key to the jewelry store."

"Are you going to carry one?"

"Oh, no," replied Frank, with a laugh. "My uncle got it made, and I'm to take it to my father, so if he ever wants to get into the store when uncle is away he can do so."

"I see."

"Father has put a lot of money into the business," went on Frank.

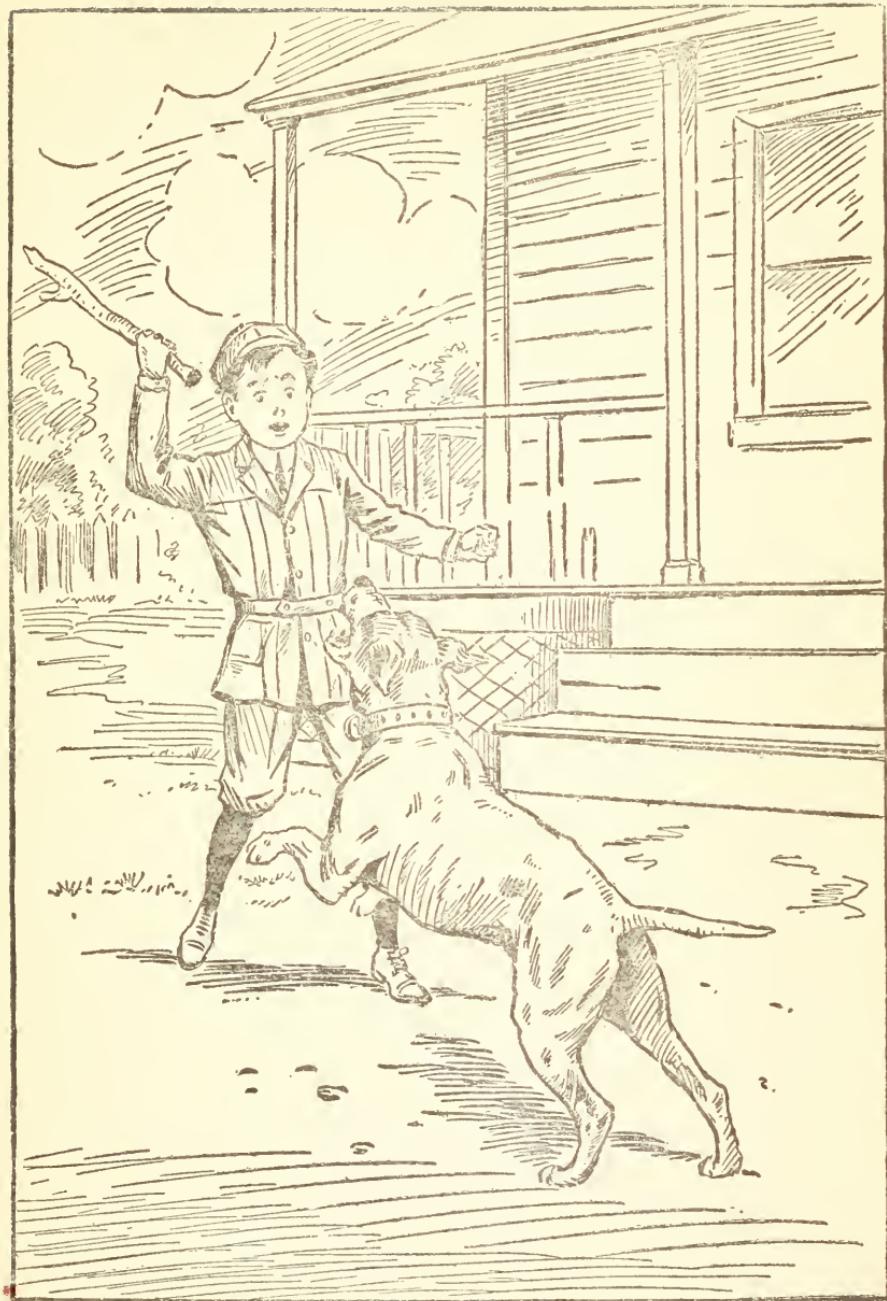
"So I heard."

"You see, uncle is a watchmaker, and both thought it would be a good thing to buy out the old jeweler, Jones, who wanted to move to the city."

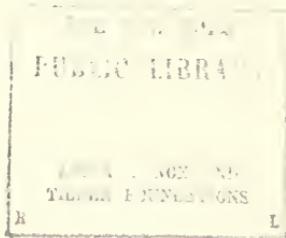
The boys reached the Dolby house to find it shut up tight and as dismal looking as ever. Frank went up the walk, while his comrades waited at the gate.

Just as he went up the steps there was a rush and a growl, and a savage dog came running up to Frank.

Every boy in Fairview was afraid of the old miser's dog.



The Animal Growled and Sprang at Him



A good many had pelted him as they went by the place, and that made him ugly. Silas Dolby, it was said, half starved the poor animal, and that made him fierce.

"Get back! Go away!" called Frank, backing away from the dog.

The animal growled and sprang and snapped at him. Frank stumbled over a broken board. Then he picked up a crotched piece of tree wood. The dog fought him half way back to the gate, when Bob and Sammy came running up to the rescue of their chum. The dog had caught and torn Frank's sleeve. They beat him off with switches, but the animal was vicious and stubborn, and followed them up.

Just as they got through the gate and slammed it shut, Mr. Dolby appeared on the steps.

"Hi, there; what are you up to?" he shouted.

"I had a message for you, but your dog wouldn't let me in," said Frank.

"What's your message?" asked the old man, surlily.

"My uncle says he will fix up your watch for you as good as new."

"Who pays for it?"

"We have arranged for that."

"All right, I'll take it down to him this evening."

Sammy was brushing the dirt from Frank's clothing while this talk was going on.

"I'm a good deal mussed up," said Frank.

"We won't go into that yard again in a hurry," said Bob.

Frank was smoothing down his coat. He happened to feel in his pockets to see if everything was safe.

"Hello!" he cried, suddenly.

"What's the matter?" asked Bob.

"The key."

"What about it?"

"It's gone! You saw me put it in my pocket on our way here."

"Yes."

"It must have fallen out of my pocket over in the yard there."

"Think so? Oh, say, Mr. Dolby!" called out Bob.

"Well, what is it?" asked the old man, who was just going back into the house.

"I wish you would chain up that dog of yours for a few minutes."

"What for?"

Frank has lost a key in your yard, and he wants to find it."

"Key to what?" growled old Dolby.

"To my father's jewelry store," explained Frank.

"What were you doing with it?"

"My uncle asked me to take it up to the house."

"Huh! You're making a great lot of trouble."

Mr. Dolby picked up a heavy club off the porch and started after the dog. When the animal dodged his blows he flung the club at him, striking him on the ribs. The dog howled with pain, slunk into his kennel, and then his master chained him up.

The boys now came into the yard. They looked and groped all over the garden where Frank had backed away from the dog. Silas Dolby stood watching them.

"Give it up," at length spoke Frank.

"Yes, we've gone over the ground pretty well," said Sammy.

"Perhaps I lost the key before I came here," added Frank.
"Thank you, Mr. Dolby."

The old miser only grunted and scowled. The boys started for home.

As they came to the next corner Bob chanced to look back. He hung behind his chatting companions for a moment or two.

"That's queer again," he said to himself.

He had seen a man turn into the Dolby place. It was only a glimpse he had of the fellow, but Bob was quite startled.

"Hey, what are you lagging behind for?" called out Sammy, briskly.

"Pshaw!" mused Bob, "I've got my head so full of that tramp, I take every stranger I see for him. It couldn't have been him I just saw go into Dolby's. And if it was, what of it?"

With that Bob let the subject drift out of his mind. He joined his chums, who were gaily talking over their plans for the big bonfire on the beach of Rainbow Lake that night.

CHAPTER V

THE BIG BONFIRE

“BOB, isn’t this fine?” cried Frank.

“Jolly!” replied Bob, with vim.

“And the eating—um! um!” gloated Sammy, nibbling at a toasted piece of cheese on the end of a stick.

The big bonfire was in progress, and it was a great success. During the afternoon Dave Duncan and some friends had gathered up all the driftwood along the beach of Rainbow Lake for half a mile. It was now blazing cheerily.

Others of the crowd had brought the eatables. A farmer’s boy had donated a quarter of a cheese. Another had brought a whole ham, home-smoked. The baker’s boy had come on the scene with a box of crackers and some doughnuts.

It was a regular toasting bee. The great fire cast a cheery glow out over the beautiful blue waters of the lake. It lit up a group of lively, happy faces. The crowd roasted potatoes, ham, crackers and cheese. Forks made out of branches were used as toasters, and the novelty and variety gave the boys wonderful appetites.

“I’m sorry Ben Travers and Dick Hazelton are missing this,” said Dave, sprinkling some salt into a luscious, roasted potato.

“Yes, they promised to come,” spoke Sammy.

“Here they are, now!” cried Bob, as two welcome figures came into the glow of the campfire.

“Hurrah!” shouted half a dozen jubilant voices.

Dick carried over his shoulder a great big corn popper, and Ben a bag.

"Had to do some running around to gather up half a bushel of prime pop corn," reported Ben.

Soon there was the swish-swish! of the hard kernels in the popper. Then—pop-pop-pop! Eager eyes watched the little snow white mountain in the popper grow and try to burst its cage.

"Here you are, fellows!" sang out Ben, emptying several quarts of the popped corn on the spread-out bag he had brought along.

Ben had a can of salt, and each one fixed the corn to his liking. Very soon all hands had eaten their fill and were bubbling over with excitement and fun.

Five mischief-makers, including Bob and Sammy, dubbed themselves a "Committee" to get up a programme. They went aside a little to make their plans. There were some suspicious and mysterious whisperings. Three of the crowd disappeared in the shadows down the beach.

"Now then, fellows," sang out Dave, mounting a rock, as if it was a throne, "attention and order."

"Set the ball rolling," drawled out lazy Tim Barker, who had eaten so much that he lay flat on the sand.

"Speech! speech!" called out Bob.

"Yes, that's good," said Dave. "Let's see—whom shall we select?"

"Why, Clarence Brooks here is the orator of the school, isn't he?" said Sammy, winking.

Clarence was a fussy little fellow whose father was a public lecturer. He was always ready to speak a piece.

"Give us 'The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck,' Clarence," suggested Frank.

"Oh, that's too old," sang out Tim Barker.

"That's why he knows it so well," chuckled Dick Hazelton.

"All right," bowed Clarence, putting one hand behind him, as he had seen his father do on the lecture platform. "The boy——"

"Hold on!" cried Bob. "You've got to have a 'deck' to stand on."

"Here," said Sammy, "this is just the thing for it."

An anchor log floated right near to the beach. It was pretty steady, and after some wobbling Clarence got a foothold on it.

"The boy stood on the burning deck——" he began.

Flop!

Splash!

Mischief lovers hiding behind a near rock had given a rope tied to the log a sudden jerk. Clarence took a dive.

His mouth was so full of water and sand, as they fished him out, that he could not say much. He acted pretty grumpy, until the next thing on the programme made him laugh with the others, and forget his own troubles.

"A song!" shouted Bob.

Everybody looked at Dudley Norton. He always sang at the school exhibitions.

"Come on, Dud," called out Dave. "There's no piano here, but 'What Are the Wild Waves Saying' will sound real cute."

Dudley had a fairly good voice. He got the first line out all right. Then——

Ba-a!

Me-aiow!

Honk-honk-honk!

To-whit! to-whoo!

Catcalls, hootings, imitations of all kinds of animals rang

out from a dozen spots among the shrubbery of the bluff side, where one-half of the crowd had secretly placed themselves. At the end of every line they had some new hoots and calls.

A hideous babel rang out at the end of the song.

Dudley, however, stuck manfully to his task. As he sounded the last note something whizzed through the air. It was then that Clarence laughed.

Some flying missile came whirling towards the bonfire. Then another, and another. The first one landed directly in the open mouth of the singer.

Swish-chug-splatter!

Dudley seemed to swallow the last note of the song. The second missile landed on the nose of the "chairman" of the crowd, Dave. The surprise and the force sent him backwards, and he landed flat on his back on the sand.

"Yah-yahoo! Bob! bing! boo! Biggity-baggity, Blue! Blue! Blue!"

This was the war-cry adopted by "The Blues," as the Burr crowd had dubbed themselves. A regular shower of missiles began to rain down from the top of the bluff.

"Tomatoes!" gurgled Dave, rubbing his face.

"And ripe ones, too!" added Clarence, with a grimace.

"Give them the chase!" said Bob.

"No, they'll round on us and spoil our campfire," said Dave.

The triumphant cries of "The Blues" died away in the distance. Then Dave suggested a game.

The crowd was divided. A space about twenty feet either side of the fire was marked with stakes. It was a sort of "Hunt the Gray," only that one side was given time to disappear in the darkness. They could hide along the beach, or in among the shrubbery of the bluff side, as they chose.

Six of the party held "the fort," as the staked-off space

was called, three at either end. The other six were called "scouts." They were sent out to rout out and capture "the enemy." Any of the latter who got into the fort without being tagged, became a "ranger" for the next game as well.

Every once in a while it was the rule that a ranger should give out a signal shout, so as to direct the scouts in the direction of his hiding place.

Bob kept with his fellow rangers until they scattered to different points along the bluff side. Then he tried a scheme of getting into the fort on his own hook.

There was not a foot on the bluff that Bob did not know by heart. He aimed to reach a point where a sharp descent led right down to the campfire. If he could get on a line between the stakes, and could run, tumble or slide fast enough, he counted on landing in the fort before any one could reach and tag him.

Edging along in among the shrubbery, Bob finally reached the bare spot in the shelving bluff where he was to try his dash for the fort.

"I guess the way is clear," he said to himself, peering around the edge of a nest of shrubbery on a shelf of rocks.

Then Bob was a good deal surprised to catch the sound of voices. At first he thought it was some of the Burr crowd lying in ambush, and pricked up his ears sharply.

As he listened, Bob traced the voices right beyond him. They were men's voices. By stooping and peering through a network of vines, Bob made out two men lying on the ground. There was light enough from the campfire to show that they had made a bed of leaves and branches, and that one of them had a green patch over one eye.

"I know the other man," said Bob to himself. "He is the tramp I met to-day."

Bob was very sure of this as he heard the voice of the man.

"Yes," he was saying, "I've picked up some money in the town."

"Then why don't we go to some hotel and be comfortable?"

"What's the matter with this soft bed in such fine weather? Has a haystack got too common for you?"

"No, but if you've got money, let's enjoy it."

"H'm! See here, we're partners, but I'm the boss."

"You act it, sure," grumbled the man with the green patch over his eye.

"I've got some money," went on the tramp, "but we're going to get so much more, that this little bit isn't worth thinking of."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is. We're coming back here soon to rob a place where we'll get a whole fortune."

"What place?"

"Never mind, now. Why I want to stay here till we leave town early in the morning, is because I don't want to be seen around here, so that when we come back again we won't be known—see?"

"I declare!" breathed Bob to himself. "These men are thieves! I wonder who they're going to rob?"

Bob became quite excited over what he had heard. It startled him to run across the tramp so many times in one day. He had had a poor opinion of the man all along. Now it was worse than ever. Bob fidgeted around, hardly knowing what to do next, when something happened.

CHAPTER VI

BOMBARDED

BOB heard some object come rolling and ripping its way along from the top of the bluff. It mowed down grass, snapped off bushes, and, striking a rock, bounded up like a rubber ball.

"It's a pumpkin," said Bob. "Here she comes! Crackey!"

The pumpkin cut through the vines that sheltered the tramp and his friend. The man with the green patch over one eye seemed to have heard it coming.

He half arose, and just then the great yellow sphere struck him. He went flat as a pancake. The pumpkin rolled over him, struck a tree, and was smashed into a thousand pieces.

"Uh! what's this now?" spluttered the tramp, as pieces of rind, seeds and fiber rained over his body and face.

"Get out of this!" cried his companion.

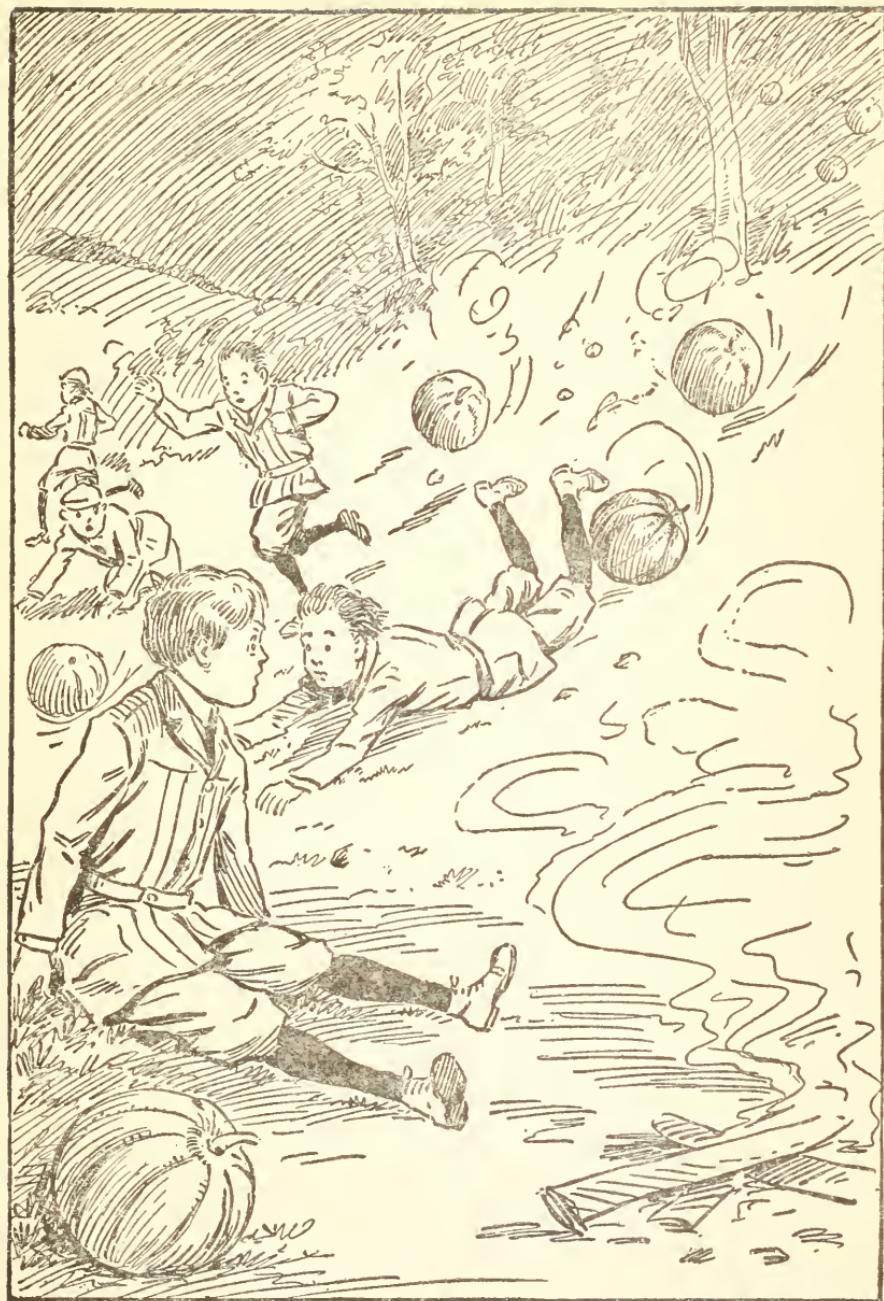
"Yes, 'tain't safe."

"It's them boys. They've seen us, and are playing tricks on us."

"Let's make ourselves scarce, then."

Bob was about ready to laugh at the comical event of the moment. Just then, however, he had all he could do to take care of himself.

A second pumpkin came bounding down the bluff side. It took Bob across the ankles, and swept him off his feet. He was thrown headlong to the ground, doubled up like a ball.



"It's Raining Pumpkins!" Gasped Bob

The boy grabbed at a bush, missed it, and went rolling over and over down the smooth incline.

There was a bare sheer descent for nearly thirty feet. Along this Bob sped, and he could not stop himself. He landed at the bottom of the slope, slid across the sand, and came to a stop not ten feet away from the blazing fire.

"It's raining pumpkins!" gasped Bob, sitting up and staring around him.

All along the beach the yellow balls were bounding into view. He saw the guards and the scouts skipping about to get out of the range of the missiles. Fellows who had been in hiding came dashing down to safe ground. Dave gave the signal whistle for "All in."

The boys gathered excitedly about their leader.

"See here, Dave," cried Sammy, "this is the work of 'The Blues!'"

"Of course it is," said Frank.

"Let's capture them," shouted Bob.

"Yes, it's pretty near time to go home, anyway," agreed Dave. "Keep together, fellows. If we catch any of them, we'll put them through a course of sprouts."

"Hear them! hear them!" yelled Sammy.

Derisive cries floated down to the beach. This nettled some of the boys. All of them were glad of a chance for new fun and excitement.

"Divide, fellows," ordered Dave.

"Yes, surround the enemy!" cried Sammy.

The two crowds scrambled up the bluff. Bob looked about for some trace of the two men he had found in their hide-out. They seemed to have gotten away from the spot.

The two parties got to the top of the bluff and ran towards each other, hoping to capture the mischief makers in a group.

They found a wagon which Jed and his friends had dragged from some farm near by, loaded for the market. It was only half filled with pumpkins. The rest of the load had been used to bombard the boys on the beach.

"They've sneaked across the meadow yonder," said Dave.

"Yes, I see some of them now," cried Sammy, eagerly. "See, they're making for that grove yonder."

There was a hot chase. Sammy had called to Bob and Frank to join him. They and several others kept with Sammy.

They reached the patch of timber and ran in and about it. They hunted in the bushes and even up in some of the trees, but got no sight or trace of the enemy.

Suddenly the well-known signal of the crowd rang out over near some haystacks. The scattered group ran in the direction of the call. They came upon Dave and six of his fellows, who had formed a circle. In its center were two panting, done-out boys of "The Blues."

"We've got a couple of them," said Dave.

"Good!" echoed a chorus.

"Find some ropes, fellows," ordered Dave.

Several boys ran towards a farm-yard near by. Bob noticed that one of the captives was Jed Burr.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Jed.

"Douse him in the lake!" cried one urgent voice.

"No, roll him down the bluff," said another.

"We'll do better than that," replied Dave. "Here, tie their arms behind them," he ordered, as several pieces of rope were brought to him.

"Hold on," said Jed. "Fun's fun, you know."

"Yes, you spoiled ours just now, so we're going to have some fresh fun," laughed Dave.

Jed tried to fight off his captors, but the crowd found it easy to bind him and his companion.

"Lead them over into the timber," said Dave.

This was done. In its loneliest part they halted. Jed was tied with his back to a tree.

"Now you'll have lots of time to think," said Dave.

"Yes, about pumpkins!"

"And tomatoes!"

"Ha! ha!"

They left Jed to his fate, kicking and scolding. The other prisoner they took along with them. A little on their way, they heard Jed whistling and yelling.

"Some of his friends will come and let him loose," said Dave.

"What are we going to do with the other fellow?" asked Bob.

"Oh, we'll give him a walk."

"Say, I'm due home," said the captive.

"Not quite yet," replied Dave. "You've got a long tramp before you, sonny."

"I only rolled one pumpkin."

"That's as bad as twenty-six."

"And it smashed before it hit any one."

"Never mind. We've got to make an example."

"Jed'll make you smart for it."

"Oh, Jed is smarting himself about this time," chuckled Sammy.

"March!" ordered the leader.

They made their prisoner dearly earn his liberty. He had to escort the whole crowd home. As they dropped out one by one, the unhappy captive had to keep right on with the others. Some of the boys took the longest way home they could think of, purposely.

Dick Hazelton was the last one to reach home. He lived about a mile north of the town. They had dragged the captive around for nearly an hour at this time. As Bob was bidding Dick good night, the prisoner sat down in the road and began crying.

"Oh, well, if it's the baby act, let him off," said Bob.

He was tired out himself after an active and exciting day. When he got home, however, he did not forget to tell his father about the two men he had heard talking in the hide-out on the bluff.

Mr. Bouncer seemed to take the matter quite seriously. Bob did not tell about Miss Simmons and the letters, nor about thinking he saw the tramp at Silas Dolby's house. He only said that he had met the tramp several times during the day, before he saw him with the man with the green shade over his eye.

His father went at once to the telephone and called up the village marshal. The next morning Bob learned that the officer had not been able to find the two tramps. They had probably left town.

Bob, Frank and Sammy the next day went over the route they had taken when they went to the Dolby place. They found the dog chained up, and even made a new search in the miser's yard, but they did not find the lost store key.

That day, too, the story of Simple Mary was told about the school. Some Fairview ladies had gotten her a pleasant place to work on a farm. Miss Williams explained in open school about the broken ink bottle, and all Bob's friends were made happy to see him cleared from a false charge.

The wind-up of the big bonfire had made "The Blues" and "The Grays" more at war than ever. About all it led to, however, was closer rivalry in baseball and football games.

Things started in smoothly at school! The daily routine

of study had the usual fun mixed in with it. There was nothing very new or exciting until the second Monday of the term.

Then, just before school commenced, as Bob, Frank and Sammy passed the house where Frank had stopped the runaway automobile, Sammy pointed towards it.

"Hello!" he cried. "Some one has moved into that place since Friday."

"That's so," said Frank, noticing some big empty boxes on the porch, "and somebody is moving about there."

"I wonder if it's the fat boy's father?" spoke Bob.

"I'll bet it is," said Sammy, as they walked on.

"Hi, hello! you fellows!" sounded a breathless voice, a minute later.

Tom Chubb came running out of the gate of the place the boys had just passed.

"Oh, moved into town, have you?" asked Frank, shaking the hand of the fat boy.

"Yes."

"We're glad of it," said Bob. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going with you," was the reply. "My father saw the teacher last evening, and I'm to start at school this morning."

"Hurrah!" shouted Sammy, waving his cap in the air.

CHAPTER VII

THE SPELLING CONTEST

TOM CHUBB was smiling all over his face at getting such a warm welcome from Bob and his friends.

"Say, fellows," he spoke, "I don't pretend to know much, but I stick to a chum."

"Good for you!" cried Sammy.

"There's a fellow you don't want to let stick to you," spoke Bob.

He pointed to Jed Burr, who was up to his usual trick of meddling with the affairs of others. Two little fellows were tossing a croquet ball to each other. Jed stood about half way between them, jumping up in the air, and trying to stop the ball.

"No, I don't like his looks one bit," said Tom.

Jed looked at Tom. He always had fun, as he called it, with green scholars. He made no move towards Tom, however, for he thought that Bob and the others had warned the fat boy against him. Besides that, Tom did not look as if he would mind one of Jed's smart slaps on the back any more than he would a fly. Then again, it looked to Jed as if it would not be easy to pull the fat boy over with his famous hand-shake trick.

"I guess he'll leave me alone," grinned Tom.

"Well, look out for him, anyway," warned Frank.

"See that, now!" cried Sammy.

Benny Lane sat on the grass near by, watching some girls skipping rope. The little crippled lad placed his crutch by

his side. Suddenly Jed stooped down and picked it up. Swinging it as he would a club, he struck with all his might at the croquet ball three feet above his head.

Crack! went the ball, stopped in its flight, and falling to the ground.

Snap! echoed the crutch end, and went flying straight through the air, striking a little boy about twenty feet away.

The lad was playing "Duck on the Rock," and was nearly knocked over. The crutch end struck his cheek, scratching and bruising it, and he gave a cry of pain. Then, seeing the cause of his hurt, he raised the brick he had been playing with, and hurled it at Jed with an angry cry.

"Good!" said Sammy, as the missile landed on Jed's stomach, and sent him reeling back.

The fat boy tried to get out of the way, but Jed stumbled and went flat. His feet swung out, and down came Tom, right on top of him.

"Hi! get off!" roared Jed.

"I can't—I'm too fat," declared Tom.

"Ouch! you're heavy."

"Can't help it. Don't wiggle so—you'll tip me over."

"Help!" whined Jed, all out of breath. "Oh, take him off!"

"Yes, I can't lift myself," chuckled Tom.

Frank, laughing, pulled Tom to his feet. Jed groaned as if a big load had been lifted from him. He started to get up. But his misery was not ended yet.

The little fellow he had hit with the crutch end had a sister, who also attended the school. She was a regular spitfire in temper. Now she came running up to Jed.

"You great big ape, you!" she cried. "Striking my little brother!" And she grabbed Jed by the hair and held on. "You—hit—my—lit-tle—brother, did you!"

"It was an accident," gasped Jed.

"Take that—and that! and that!"

Jed roared like a whipped calf. At each word she spoke, the little miss gave him a hard box on the ears.

By this time every boy and girl on the playground had gathered at the spot.

"Oh, goody! goody!" cried some little girls, clapping their hands in glee.

"You let go my hair!" blubbered Jed, making a pretty picture to look at.

"And that!" cried the girl, giving him a last cuff, as he ran off.

"Cow-ard! cow-ard!" shouted all the little fellows, as Jed, in shame and disgrace, sneaked away. He left his cap behind him, and was afraid to come back for it.

"Tom," said Sammy, slapping him on the back, "you fell down just in time."

"Sorry, but I'm so fat, you know!" grinned Tom, and everybody laughed.

Jed Burr was grumpy all the rest of that day. He kept away from the games at recess. Bob noticed him and two or three of his favorite chums talking together in a mysterious way.

"Tell you, Frank," he said, a little later, "Jed looks pretty ugly at us."

"Oh, he'll get over it," replied Frank, lightly.

"One of Jed's friends hinted to me to-day that we'd better look out."

"Pshaw, Jed Burr is just squelched," said Sammy.

The seat the teacher gave Tom was not very comfortable for him. Bob had an end desk, and gave it up to Tom till the teacher could arrange for some other. Bob took the desk of a scholar who was absent.

The next morning was announced for a spelling contest. This meant high marks for those who spelled best, and there was a great deal of talk and excitement over it.

"Spelling is about all I know," said Tom, the next morning, as he and Bob and the others wended their way to school.

"Good at it, are you?" asked Frank.

"Ought to be. My father wouldn't get me my bicycle last year until I had the whole spelling book perfect from end to end. Say, you'll just see me shine to-day."

After recess, the teacher named those who were to do the spelling. Jed Burr was absent, but two or three of his chums were on the list.

"Alphabet," "ardent," "alder," "animal," "beauty," "blanket"—there were no mistakes so far. Miss Smith gave out "cote."

"C-o-a-t," said Sammy, proudly.

"Next."

"C-o-t-e," spelled Bob.

Everybody laughed at this.

"Correct," said the teacher, "I should have explained that the word meant a pigeon-house."

There were a lot of misses after that. There was a great deal of fun, too, for some comical errors were made. One boy spelled knock "noq." Another made "kwal" out of quail, and a pert little girl lisped out "sqwirm" when Miss Smith gave out the word "worm."

When the contest was over, Tom, two of Jed's closest chums, and Bob received high marks. Tom was older than most of those in the class, and it was not wondered at that he did so well. Bob was always at the head of his class. The great surprise was that the friends of Jed, who like him were put down as very backward scholars, got high marks.

Bob noticed that after the spelling was over Miss Williams went all through the papers in her desk. She acted quite thoughtful and serious. After the dinner hour, just before school commenced that afternoon, a little girl came out to the playground and spoke to him.

"Miss Williams wants to see you, Bob Bouncer," she said.

"I wonder what for?" spoke Bob.

He found Miss Williams alone in the schoolroom.

"Close the door, Bob," she said, as he entered. "Sit down," she added, as he obeyed her and came up to the desk.

The school teacher looked very serious. Bob wondered what it all meant. He sat waiting for her to speak to him.

"Bob," said Miss Williams, after quite a pause, "you did very well in your spelling to-day."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Bob. "I tried to. I did the best I could."

"Did you have any help, Bob?" Miss Williams asked, looking straight into Bob's face.

"Why—I don't know what you mean, Miss Williams," said Bob. "Frank and I went over a lot of words at home, last night."

"I mean, you had no key, no idea of what words I was going to give out?" asked the teacher.

"Oh, dear, no! How could I?"

Miss Williams paused again. It seemed hard for her to go on, but she finally said:

"Bob, I had two lists of words. One I had copied to send to a sister who is a teacher in the next township. Both were in my desk when I left the school last night."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Bob.

"This noon I found one of them missing."

"Why, who could have taken it?" said Bob.

"I am sorry," replied Miss Williams, "but I found it in your desk."

"In my desk?" cried Bob.

"Yes, Bob."

"When?"

"Just now. I searched all the desks. It was in yours, Bob," went on Miss Williams, and her voice shook a little. "I think a great deal of you, and I do not wish to misjudge you, but you must explain this."

"Why, how can I?" spoke Bob. "I don't know anything about the list."

"Have you any idea how it came in your desk?"

"Why—yes, I have——"

A sudden thought had come into Bob's mind. It was a dreadful thought, too. He almost turned pale, he was so upset. Just like a flash a quick idea made him almost gasp.

"Speak out, Bob," urged Miss Williams, but Bob was silent. He hung his head and tried to think out a great muddle in his mind.

"If you know anything about the missing list, Bob," went on his teacher, "you must certainly tell me. If you suspect any one, it is right you should say so."

"Miss Williams," replied Bob, making up his mind and looking up now, "I could make a guess, but I won't do it till I am sure I am right."

"Bob," said Miss Williams, "a week from Monday the school board meets. It is my duty to tell them what has happened. You know as well as I do that they will suspend or expel a scholar for using a key to any of the lessons."

"But I haven't used any key. I never heard of the list until this minute," declared Bob.

"But you know who did take it. You will have to tell

me whom to suspect, or I shall report to the board. That is all."

Bob left the schoolroom without another word.

"It's too bad!" he said, almost angrily, as he reached the outside. "I can guess who did it—and it's too bad for him, too," added Bob Bouncer, gloomily.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAD BULL

“NEWS from the North Pole!” shouted Dick Hazelton, bounding into the playground, two mornings later.

“What does that mean?” asked Bob.

“Frost.”

“When—where?”

“On the pumpkins! You fellows who live in town don’t get up early enough to see what’s going on these crisp, bright days. Get ready for some new fun, fellows.”

“What’s doing?” asked Frank.

“Nutting.”

“Hurrah!” cheered Sammy.

“Walnuts down in the flats, and hickory nuts over in the North Woods,” said Dick. “See here, Frank, can’t we get the fellows to go Saturday?”

“Of course we can,” replied Frank.

“My crowd will go,” put in Jed Burr.

“Thank you!” laughed Frank, slyly.

“Say, what will I do?” asked Tom. “I’m too fat to climb trees.”

“You can hold the bag,” chuckled Sammy.

Bob looked at Jed, and then at Tom. Then he walked away to another part of the playground.

“Hi, Bob!” sang out Sammy, running after him. “Where are you bound for?”

“Nowhere.”

"What's the matter with you, anyway, the last day or two?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, there is."

"I'm sort of feeling cross, that's all."

Sammy fell back with a rather glum face, and Bob walked about alone. He was not feeling cross at all, although he thought he was. He was thinking.

Bob had felt for two days that he was in disgrace. Miss Williams showed no change in her manner towards him before the scholars, but he did not feel as free and friendly with her as of old.

Bob had worried some, but he had no hard feelings against anybody. He knew that he was not to blame about the stolen spelling list. One thing troubled Bob greatly, however; he believed that Tom Chubb had taken the list from the teacher's desk.

That was the very first thought that had come into Bob's mind when Miss Williams spoke of the list. Bob hated to think that Tom could do a mean trick. Something he remembered, however, helped to turn his mind in that way.

Ever since Tom had come to school, he had told a lot of stories of the ways down at Springville Academy. The boys there had taught him a good many tricks, as they called them.

Tom said it was quite usual for the fellows to have key books and carry notes with them, when they were trying for a new grade. What was worse, the fat boy did not seem to see much wrong in these acts.

So Bob had jumped at once to the conclusion that Tom had stolen the spelling list out of Miss Williams' desk.

"Didn't he have every word right?" Bob asked himself. "How could it come in his desk, or rather my desk, which he was using, unless he put it in there?"

Only guessing this, however, Bob was not willing to give

the teacher the clew. Besides that, he would not betray a friend. He felt sorry for Tom, and he did not believe he could trust or like him as he had done.

All this Bob had carried in his mind for two days. He did not tell Frank or Sammy about it, but he did not feel very good over the way he was being suspected by the teacher.

"If Tom did take the list," thought Bob, "and they fasten it on him, he will certainly be expelled. That would be pretty bad for his folks, for he didn't seem to have been a very bright scholar before."

Just now, Bob had some new thoughts about the affair. He had put some facts together that had not at first come to his mind. He remembered that Jed Burr had not been at school the day of the spelling test. He remembered, too, that two of Jed's chums had come out better than they ever had before in the spelling.

Putting this and that together, Bob wondered if it could be possible that Jed had tried to "get even" by getting him into new trouble, just as he had when the bottle of ink in the storeroom was found broken.

If Jed had done this, he must have done it after school, when the teacher and all the scholars were away, and forgetting that Tom was just then using Bob's desk.

"I won't speak to Tom about it, not just yet, anyway," decided Bob. "If he didn't do it, he will feel bad at my thinking he did. If he was bad enough to do it, he will deny it, of course. It's some days before the school board meets. I'll just keep quiet, and see how things turn out. I'll keep a sharp eye, too, on Jed Burr and his friends."

Bob was in a better frame of mind by the time the school bell rang. He crossed the playground slowly. Most of the scholars had got into the building. Just coming through the

gate, and hurrying along as fast as they could, were Minnie Grey and little crippled Benny Lane.

Minnie had hold of Benny's arm and was urging him along. The little fellow was using his mended crutch the best he knew how. Minnie wore a red winter cape, for the mornings were beginning to get quite chill. She was hurrying so fast that this fell from her shoulders. She did not stop to pick it up. Instead, she acted as if too frightened to do anything but run and make Benny keep up with her.

"Why," cried Bob, suddenly, "that bull is chasing them!"

Just then Bob caught sight of the animal. It came rushing down the road Minnie and Benny had just left. The bull was roaring, its head down, its tail lashing the air.

"Hurry! hurry!" shouted Bob.

He ran towards the gate as fast as he could. As he got between it and the two children, the bull lowered its horns.

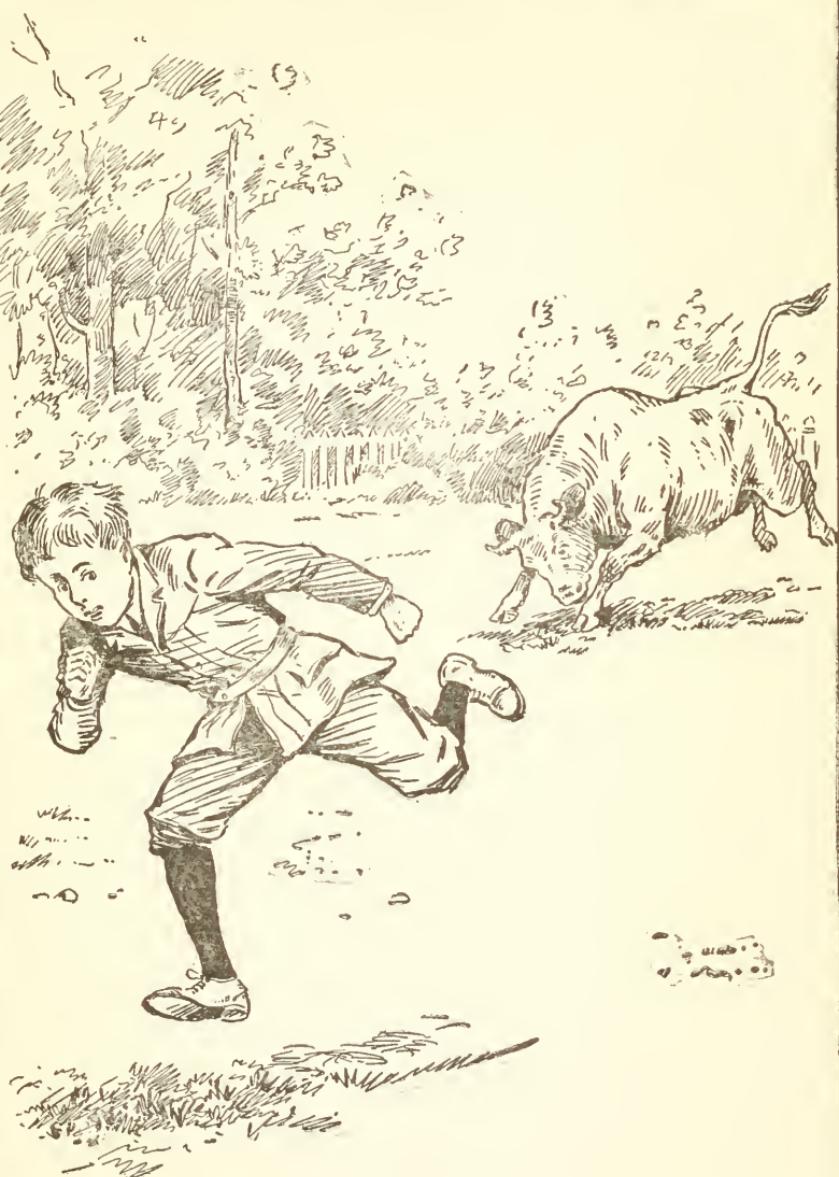
There was a post midway in the gate space. The animal could not get through without getting this out of the way. Bob saw the bull make a great rush. Its big horns struck the post, and snapped it off near the ground as if it were a mere pipe-stem.

Bob cast a quick glance at the two children. They were still fully fifty feet from the schoolhouse. Minnie was about dragging Benny along, who had begun to cry in terror.

"It's Farmer Doane's big bull, the one he always keeps shut up," said Bob. "They say he's very ugly. He gored and killed two pigs last week. He must have broken out. It's that red cape that roused him up."

Bob made a run for the spot where the cape lay on the ground. He snatched it up just in time. The bull with a great bellow was making a rush after the two children.

"I'll have to do some dodging," thought Bob, "but I've



He Made a Bee-line for the Schoolhouse

got to keep him away till Minnie and Benny get into the schoolhouse."

What Bob tried to do now was to get the attention of the animal away from the children. He gave the red cape a fling right into the face of the animal. It fell at one side. The bull eyed it and made a dash for it.

"Good! they're safe!" cried Bob, as he saw Minnie and Benny pass through the open doorway of the schoolhouse. They fairly fell over the threshold in their wild haste and fear.

The bull drove its head down at the cape. Then the animal stamped it to fragments in the soft sod. Then with a frightful bellow it started for Bob.

"It's a run, and a fast one," thought Bob.

He made a straight bee-line for the schoolhouse, not daring to risk looking behind him. He could hear the great thudding hoofs of the pursuing bull strike the ground hard and fast.

The animal snorted, and once Bob almost fancied he could feel its hot breath sweep the back of his neck. At any rate, it was an eager race.

"I've made it!" cried the lad, breathless and excited, as he bounded over the threshold of the schoolhouse door.

As he did so he knocked over Frank and Sammy, crowding towards it to see what was going on. Bob had just a glimpse of crowding, frightened boys and girls.

"Shut the door!" he yelled, and got to his feet to help two of the scholars to give it a quick slam.

Bob shot the bolt just in time. The door shook violently the next moment, as the heavy body of the bull grazed it.

"What is it?" asked Miss Williams, hurrying from her desk.

"It's a mad bull," said Sammy.

"Are the children all in?" asked the teacher, anxiously.
"They're all right, Miss Williams," replied Bob.

Just then a frightful scream came from the side of the room.

Crash! went the lower half of a window, sending splinters of wood and glass half way across the floor.

The terrified scholars crowded to the other end of the room, as the bull, with a fierce roar and blood-shot eyes, stuck its head through the ruined window.

CHAPTER IX

THE NUTTING PARTY

THE schoolroom was in an uproar. Some of the smaller scholars were crying. Miss Williams looked quite pale.

"Be quiet, children," she said.

"Oh, that cow will come in here and eat us all up!" blubbered one little girl.

"Do not think of going outside," said the teacher to Bob and Frank, who went towards the door, while Jed and his crowd made sure they were safe at the other end of the room.

"We ought to get word to Farmer Doane," said Bob.

"You must not risk going out," insisted Miss Williams.

"The bull may go away," spoke Sammy.

"He doesn't act like it," replied Bob.

They watched the animal from the window. The bull did not move away from the building. He walked around it twice, rooted up some vines, kicked the door-step loose, and looked in at the window.

"We are in a state of siege," said the teacher, "but there is no danger while we remain indoors."

This did not, however, quiet the scholars. Nobody thought of sitting down, and study and order seemed out of the question.

"Can't we do something, Bob?" asked Frank.

"I'm trying to think if we can."

"Say, I wouldn't like to tackle that animal," said Tom, in a scared way.

"Let's throw something out at him," suggested Sammy.

"I think I know how to fix things," said Bob, finally.

"How?" asked Frank.

"The bull keeps well on this side of the schoolhouse."

"Just now he does, yes."

"Well, you come over to the other side and open a window."

"What for?"

"And let me out, and then shut the window quick."

"See here, Bob——"

"You needn't worry. I may not do all I hope to, but the bull won't catch me."

"He will if he sees you."

"Not until I'm all safe and sound."

Frank knew that Bob was bold and brave, but not reckless. Something had to be done, so he went over to the window with Bob.

"You watch, and tell us if the bull starts away from that side of the house," Bob said to Sammy.

"All right."

Frank lifted the window quickly. Bob was outside before Miss Williams knew of it. As he started on a run, Sammy set up a great shout of warning.

The animal caught sight of Bob as he got past the end of the building, and started after him. Frank and the others, curious and breathless, watched Bob as he dashed across the playground.

"Oh, he'll be caught!" cried Minnie Grey, in affright.

"No, he won't," said Sammy. "I see what he's after."

"Oh, yes—the swing," guessed Frank.

Bob was too smart to think he could reach the fence before the bull could come up with him. About a hundred feet from the schoolhouse was a big swing. Two large dead trees

formed the sides. Across their top was chained a big wooden log.

Two holes had been bored through the log. The rope, a thick heavy cable, was run through these, and knotted.

Bob reached the swing well ahead of the bull. He was a good climber. Spry and nimble, he was up one of the dead trees in a jiffy. The bull, headed for the swing, arrived under it as the boy got clear to the cross-piece, and sat astride of it.

The animal moved around the swing in a circle, glaring up at Bob and bellowing. The lad pulled one knotted end of the rope up and cut off the knot with his pocket-knife, then the other.

Now he made a stout slip-knot of one end. The other he tied around one of the side supports of the swing. He did not know much about lassoing animals, but the task Bob had set himself was a pretty easy one.

The bull kept moving around in a ring. Once in a while it would rush up against one of the trees and prod with its horns. Then it would glare up at Bob and roar fiercely.

"Now's my chance," said Bob, quickly, as the animal paced almost directly under the log piece on which the boy sat.

Bob did not fling the rope. He just dropped its looped end. He was well pleased, as without any tangle with the horns the loop fell right against the neck of the bull.

The instant the animal felt the rope it reared and shook its head. Then it started on a run. Bob clung close to the top beam of the swing, for he guessed what was coming.

The bull was going pell-mell. As the loop of the rope tightened, it came to a halt so sudden and terrific, that the animal was forced to its knees.

The swing shook and creaked, but Bob did not feel at all uneasy. The rope was strong and the sides were solid.

"Hurrah!"

"Good for Bob!"

Cheers greeted the brave boy as he slid down one side of the swing and landed safely on the ground. Then he ran his fastest. There was no need of hurry, he found, as he halted outside of range of the bull. The animal had got a wrench that tamed it down a good deal.

Bob saw that the loop was tight as could be about the neck of the bull. The more the bull tugged, the tighter it became. The boy started out on a new run, and waved his hand at the peering faces at the schoolhouse window.

"I'm going to tell Farmer Doane," he shouted.

Bob came back in a quarter of an hour with the farmer. Mr. Doane brought a leather muzzle and a leading rope, and soon had the bull under mastery.

Bob felt pleased and proud as he walked into the schoolroom. The girls were looking at him with beaming eyes. Tom Chubb could not help giving him a hearty slap on the shoulder. Miss Williams smiled at him in a grateful way.

It took some time for the school to quiet down. Before studies were taken up, a little scrap of folded paper passed from hand to hand till it reached Bob. When he opened it, he read:

"You are a reel heero, Bob Bouncer.

"MINNIE,
"BENNY."

At recess the little fellows crowded about Bob as if he was a hero, indeed, and the girls said all kinds of nice things about him.

Bob still had in mind the trouble about the stolen spelling

list. He felt a good deal better now, however, than he had done before.

Miss Williams was kinder to him. Jed Burr was uglier than ever.

Everybody looked forward to Saturday with a good deal of pleasure and excitement. About a dozen of the boys were going with the nutting party. They were to meet at a cross-roads just south of the town.

Bob, Frank and Sammy were on hand bright and early, each provided with a good-sized feed bag and some lunch. Jed and his friends came upon the scene a little later.

Tom Chubb arrived panting and late. He went on to tell one of his wonderful stories about a dream he had about being in a cocoanut forest, and hated to wake up from it.

"I say, Tom," remarked Frank, "you've brought no bag."

"Me? Guess not," replied Tom, smartly, sticking his hands in his pockets, and strutting around.

"Why didn't you?" asked Bob.

"Oh, I carried things for some fellows once," chuckled Tom, "and I don't do it again in a hurry."

The boys laughed heartily at this hint of the time when some chums at Springville Academy got Tom to carry a heavy chain several miles to tap a bee-tree that did not exist.

"Besides," added Tom, "I'm too fat to climb trees, so I'm no use except to have fun with."

The party trooped down the pleasant country road, joking, singing, and hailing every farmer they met. Dick Hazelton met them about half a mile out of town.

"Here's our guide," shouted Sammy.

"Yes," cried Dick, "and I'm going to lead you to the biggest raft of hickory nuts you ever laid your eyes on."

"Jolly!" shouted Sammy, waving his cap in glee.

"I went over to the flats this morning early," said Dick. "I tell you the nuts are prime for picking."

Jed and his crowd kept pretty well to themselves. As the crowd reached another cross-road they started down it.

"Hold on, there," shouted Dick.

"What for?" asked Jed.

"That's the wrong way."

"It's right enough for us," retorted Jed, smartly.

"This road is the shortest one to the flats."

Jed did not reply, but with his party swung off on the cross-road.

"They're up to something," said Frank.

"I wonder what it is?" asked Sammy.

"Something to spoil our fun, I'm sure," spoke Tom. "It's just like them."

"I think they're going to run for it when they get out of sight," said Dick. "They are aiming to make a cross cut and reach the flats first."

"Suppose they do?"

"Oh, they think they'll gather up all the nuts. Huh! there's a month's picking for ten schools."

CHAPTER X

“THE DAY OF THEIR LIVES”

THE boys kept on their way. As they reached the farm where Dick lived, he took them all into the dairy. His mother came out and welcomed the crowd. She brought half a dozen tin cups.

“Now then, boys,” she said, passing these around, “Dick will show you where the buttermilk is.”

“Say,” spoke Tom, as he helped himself to the second cup of the cool, refreshing buttermilk, “I’d like to live here.”

“Jed’s crowd are missing it, I tell you,” said Sammy, smacking his lips.

“Dick, this is just fine,” spoke Bob.

Mrs. Hazelton came out with a package of home-made cheese to add to the lunch, and the boys greeted her with a cheer and started briskly on their way.

Their guide led them to a fence, over it, and through a dry watercourse.

“Here we are, fellows,” he announced, pointing to a scattered grove of trees on the rise opposite.

“Hurrah!” shouted Sammy. “I feel like a squirrel.”

The crowd placed their lunches under a shady tree and started over for the hickory grove. Soon each one, except Tom, was scrambling up a tree.

“There’s a rather low one over yonder,” said Tom to Bob. “I guess I’ll tackle it.”

“What with?” asked Bob.

Tom drew a stout slung-shot from his pocket. Then he rambled along the watercourse, and filled an old fruit basket he had found with good-sized pebbles.

The next hour was a jolly one for the happy crowd. There were some mishaps, but only amounting to scratches and scrapes. The shaken limbs of the trees rained down hickory nuts like hailstones.

Bob came back to the tree where he had left Tom to find his friend lying fast asleep on the grass. A little pile of hickory nuts lay near his coat and cap.

"Had lots of fun," Tom declared, when he woke up. "I'm not a very good shot, though."

All hands were soon ready for lunch. Nearly every bag was filled. The boys were pleased with their success, and it was a gay crowd that enjoyed the dinner under the trees.

"What now?" asked Sammy, when he had eaten his fill.

"Walnuts next," replied Dick.

"What will we do with the hickories?" asked Frank.

"We'll leave them here," said Dick. "Bring along the empty bags, and we'll go up to the North Woods after the walnuts."

"It will be some tramping, each lugger two bags home," spoke Sammy.

"You won't have to do that," answered Dick.

"Why not?"

"When we get all the bags full, I'll go home and get a wagon and team."

"That will be fine," said Tom.

"Say, Dick," spoke Frank, "what do you suppose has become of Jed and his crowd?"

"They must have taken in the walnut trees first," replied Dick.

The route to the North Woods took the boys along the

road where Jed and his friends had left them earlier in the morning. As they came up to a farmhouse Dick said:

"Farmer Griggs lives here. We'll go in and get a good cool drink of well water."

They trooped into the farm-yard. They were all gathered about the well when an old man came out from the house.

"How'dy, Dick," he said. "Mornin', lads. Hey, lost any of your friends?"

"Have you found any, Mr. Griggs?" asked Dick.

"I have, for a fact," replied the farmer, with a grin, "six of them."

"He means Jed and the others," said Frank.

"I shouldn't wonder," answered Bob.

"Where are the friends you spoke of, Mr. Griggs?" asked Dick, guessing.

"Treed. Just step this way, so you can see the orchard, and you'll understand what I mean," replied the farmer, with a grim chuckle.

The boys trooped eagerly after the farmer. Behind the barns of the place was a small fenced-in orchard. The trees hung heavy with red, luscious fruit. More than one of the boys knew of the fine fruit that came from the Griggs farm and was on sale in the village every fall and winter.

"After you've looked a bit, lads," said the farmer, "you can go and eat your fill. I've no objection to any orderly boys helping themselves to an apple or two, but when it comes to stealing bagfuls, though, and breaking whole limbs off the trees, I can't stand it. There's the fellows I spoke of," added Mr. Griggs, coming to a halt.

Inside the orchard were four big dogs. They did not look so fierce and ugly, but there was something about them that told one they knew how to protect the property of their owner.

Each one of the animals lay on the grass under a tree, its head between its paws, its eyes fixed up among the branches overhead. Among these, two in one tree, the boys made out Jed and his companions.

"How long have they been there, Mr. Griggs?" asked Dick, his face on a broad grin.

"About three hours."

"And haven't dared to come down on account of the dogs—I see," said Frank, smiling.

"They may now," answered the farmer. "I guess they've had a good dose this time."

He whistled to the dogs, opened the gate for them to pass out, and waved his hand towards the treed captives.

"Hey, you fellows!" he shouted, "you can go on your way now."

Jed and his friends climbed down from the trees. They sneaked for the further corner of the fence away from their amused schoolmates.

"They look pretty forlorn, for a fact," chuckled Tom.

"Go in and help yourselves, lads," invited Farmer Griggs, opening the gate for Bob and his friends to pass through.

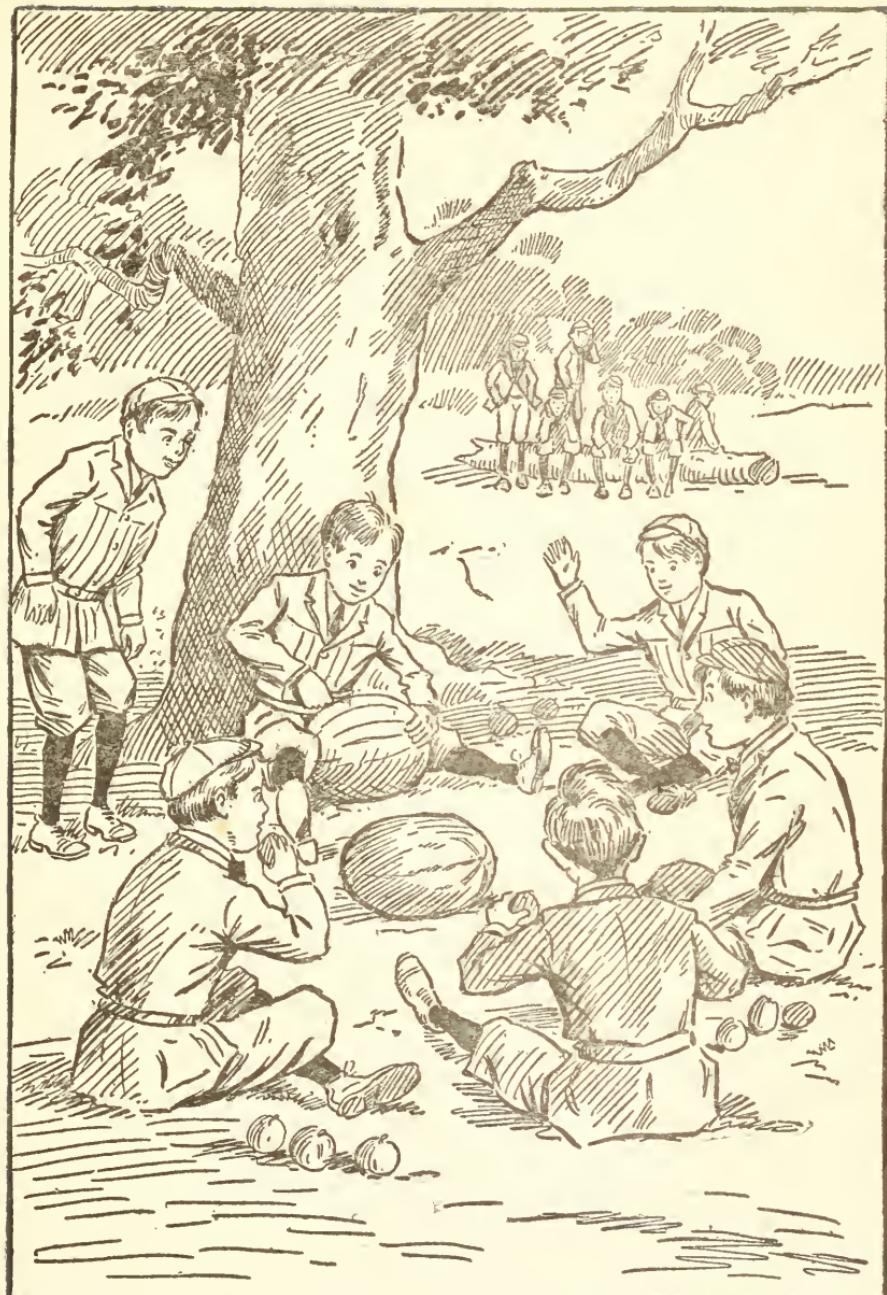
"Oh, say, you're awful kind," cried Sammy.

"Just pick the windfalls," directed the farmer. "Hey!" as the boys rushed gladly for the trees, "as you go over the next fence you'll find a little melon patch. You take two of the late watermelons—no more, mind you."

"I'll see that they obey orders, Mr. Griggs," promised Dick, "and—thank you!"

"Many thanks!" shouted the others.

The boys ate two or three apples apiece and stowed as many more in their pockets. Then there was a rush for the melon patch. Bob and Dick came out into the road, each



"Oh, Say! Isn't This Glorious!" Cried Sammy

carrying a big fat melon of the late variety that looked ripe and tempting.

"Oh, say, isn't this glorious!" cried Sammy, as they all sat down under a tree, by the roadside, and Dick got out his pocket-knife.

Jed and his friends sat on a fallen tree about fifty yards distant. They watched the boys enviously, while not getting slivers out of their hands and the creases out of their clothes.

"Come on, Burr, and all of you," cried Dick, in a pleasant, open-hearted way.

Jed and his companions skulked up to the spot, rather shame-faced. No one referred to their long roost in the apple-trees. Sammy, however, had to laugh outright when it came out that they had left their lunches on the ground, and the dogs had eaten them up.

Bob and his friends divided what they had in their pockets with Jed's party. This and a watermelon made the deserters feel a good deal better.

All hands went to the North Woods, and put in two hours gathering walnuts. About three o'clock Dick and Bob started off for the Hazelton farm, leaving their comrades in the woods.

Dick got a team and a light wagon at the farm. First, he and Bob drove over to the flat and loaded in the bags of hickory nuts.

Then they drove around into the North Woods, and the walnuts were safely stowed. The boys crowded into the wagon on top of them.

"Say, this feels good," said Tom, as he rested his tired limbs.

"Never had such a grand day in my life!" cried Sammy.

The team took the boys around to their homes. Even Jed Burr voted that they had enjoyed a fine occasion.

Bob was so tired he could hardly do his evening chores, and he was glad to get to bed early. All the next day, too, he had to keep his scratched hands rubbed with grease. His knees were pretty sore from climbing.

Monday morning he woke up with a start. A loud voice sounded in the yard below, and Bob ran to the window, wondering at the commotion. He heard the window in his father's room pushed up.

"What's the matter?" called down Mr. Bouncer to Mr. Haven, his neighbor, who, quite pale and excited, had just breathlessly called out to him.

"Get up quick, Mr. Bouncer—the jewelry store has been robbed!"

CHAPTER XI

ROBBERY

“ROBBED!” echoed Mr. Bouncer, in great surprise.

“Yes, of nearly everything of value it contained.”

“You amaze me,” said Bob’s father.

“My brother just notified me,” went on Mr. Haven. “I wish you would come down to the store with me.”

“Certainly, at once,” replied Mr. Bouncer.

Bob was greatly excited at the news. He ran for his clothes and got them on in a hurry. Then he bounded down the stairs. By this time his father had joined Mr. Haven, and the two gentlemen were hurrying down the street towards the center of the village.

Bob started to run after them, when he saw Frank just leaving the yard of his own house. He waited till Frank came up, all in a flurry, buttoning up his coat as if he had put it on in haste.

“Frank, the store has been robbed, I heard your father say.”

“Yes,” replied Frank. “He’s terribly worried about it. You know, he borrowed a lot of money to buy it out and start my uncle in business.”

“Yes, I heard so.”

“It would about ruin him if the thieves took much.”

“Your father says they did.”

“Oh, I hope not—my uncle may be mistaken.”

As the boys, following their fathers, turned into the main

business street of the town, they noticed a crowd gathered in front of the jewelry store.

Early as the hour was, the village marshal had already reached the place. The boys expected to see the windows smashed, or the doors broken in, but there was not a sign of disorder about the place. The show windows and the shelves looked as neat and orderly as usual.

Frank and Bob went inside the store. They found the marshal and the others standing in front of the large iron safe at the end of the store. Its massive doors stood open. Its drawers were pulled out and scattered on the floor, and its shelves were empty.

"Gone—all gone!" groaned Mr. Haven, turning very pale.

"Yes, they have taken everything there was in the safe," said his brother.

"When did you find it out?" asked the marshal.

"Not half an hour ago," was the reply. "I came down earlier than usual, because I had some hurry repairing orders. I let myself in and then I noticed the open safe."

"It's a weak, old-fashioned iron box," said the marshal, looking the safe over. "I often told Jones it wasn't any good. The robbers pried it open easily."

"But how did they get into the store?" asked Mr. Bouncer.

"That is the mystery," replied Frank's uncle. "The door was locked as usual, and the window-catches all in place."

"Why, then, they must have had a key," said the marshal.

"Evidently they did."

"The lost key—do you remember?" Bob whispered to Frank, in an excited tone.

"Some one found it!"

"Yes!"

"And let himself in here! Who could have done it?"

Before Bob could reply, Mr. Haven sank into a chair with a groan.

"They have taken everything," he declared, "the silverware, the watches and chains, and all the solid gold goods we carried."

"Did they amount to much?" asked the marshal.

"Over five thousand dollars."

"Too bad! My assistant watchman and myself patrolled the town all night. He reported no suspicious persons about, and I saw none."

"They got in easily, and took what they liked."

Neither Frank nor Bob ate much breakfast that morning. They were too excited to think of anything except the robbery. When they started for school the whole village was aroused over the robbery. Everybody was talking about it. When they got to the schoolhouse even the smallest scholars spoke of the event.

Frank felt pretty bad. Bob was very sorry for Mr. Haven. He told Frank so, and tried to cheer up his chum.

"The robbers must have been strangers," he said.

"I think that," returned Frank.

"The marshal has got half a dozen men started in different directions. They are bound to get some idea of the way the thieves have gone."

"I hope so. Why, they even locked the door after them when they went away! My father has offered two hundred dollars reward."

Bob did not do much studying that day. When school was over in the afternoon he went home with Frank to hear if anything had been heard of the robbers.

Mr. Haven was seated on the porch, talking gloomily with a lawyer. Mrs. Haven was about her work as usual, but looked very serious.

"What's the news, Frank?" asked Bob, after Frank had gone into the house and had seen his mother.

"They haven't caught the robbers."

"It's queer how the fellows have gotten away without being seen, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is, Bob, and that's what puzzles the marshal, my mother says."

"I'll be back after supper, Frank," said Bob. "I wonder if Sammy will be over?"

"He said he would," replied Frank.

"All right, I may want you to go somewhere with me."

"What do you mean?" asked Frank.

"I'll tell you after supper."

Bob went away, very thoughtful. He was doing much thinking. At the corner of two streets he stood still for a long time, as if trying to make up his mind to something.

"It can't do any harm to follow out my idea," he said to himself and started up quickly.

Bob went straight to the home of Miss Simmons. He had not seen her since the day he had noticed the tramp leave the place. Bob found her seated in a rocking-chair on the porch, sewing.

"Why, how do you do, Bob?" said the old maid. "I thought you were coming to see me? I wanted to give you something for helping me get back those letters."

"I don't want anything for that, Miss Simmons," replied Bob, "but there's something else you can do for me, if you will."

"What is that, Bob?"

"I'd like to know if that tramp I saw here brought you back those four letters."

Miss Simmons flushed and fidgeted. Then she asked, sharply:

"Have you told anybody about the letters, Bob?"

"No, ma'am, not a soul."

"You're a good boy, Bob; a very good boy."

"Thank you, Miss Simmons."

"And about those letters——"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"The man you speak of did bring them back."

"I thought that. Miss Simmons, have you seen him since the day you lost the letters?"

The old maid looked troubled. Then she glanced sharply at Bob.

"What are you asking that for?" she said.

"Because I believe he has been up to some mischief," replied the boy. "If I knew all about his dealings with you, it might help me find out what I am after."

"Well, Bob," said the lady, "he is certainly a very bad man. He found those letters, and nearly scared me to death saying he would print them if I didn't pay him to get them back. I gave him all the money I had. He wanted more."

"How much?" asked Bob.

"Sixty dollars, ten in cash."

"The rascal!"

"He made me give him a note for that fifty dollars. Then he asked me who would cash it. He got out of me that Mr. Silas Dolby did that kind of business. I suppose he placed the note with him."

"That explains how I came to see the tramp at the old miser's house the night Frank lost the key to the jewelry store," thought Bob.

"Early yesterday morning," went on Miss Simmons, "the man came to the back door here. He had another man with him."

"What kind of a man?" asked Bob, eagerly.

"A man with a green shade over one eye."

Bob could hardly keep from crying out. He was sure now that the two men he had heard talk about robbery in the bluff hide-out, had been in Fairview the day previous.

"He wanted something to eat," said the old maid. "I gave them their breakfast. Then the man asked for some money. I told him I had given him all I intended to. He acted sort of ugly, and I said I would call the marshal if he troubled me any more. Then he went away pretty quick."

"Thank you, Miss Simmons," said Bob. "You have told me just what I wanted to know."

"It won't—won't mix me in anything about those letters?" asked the old maid.

"No, indeed. I haven't mentioned about them, and I shan't. The man won't bother you any more, either, Miss Simmons."

Bob left the place with big thoughts in his mind. He was only a boy, but he felt that he had found out something that a grown man would be glad to learn.

"I'm going to do something about that robbery," said Bob to himself. "I hardly know what just yet, but I'll think out some way."

It was just after supper that Bob went over to the Haven place. Frank and Sammy were waiting for him.

"Any news of the robbers yet?" asked Bob.

"Not a word," replied Frank. "The marshal says he can't find that any tramps or strangers have been hanging around town lately."

Bob said nothing. He kept it to himself that the town marshal was mistaken.

"Well, fellows," he said, "I want you to join me in a hunt."

"Eh? What kind of a hunt?" asked Sammy, with great interest.

"Not a treasure hunt, mind you," replied Bob, with a faint smile, remembering Sammy's weakness.

"Oh," said Sammy, flushing up, "what kind of a hunt, then?"

"I want to see if we can't find the men who robbed Mr. Haven's jewelry store," replied Bob.



CHAPTER XII

BOB BOUNCER'S CLEW

"TRY to catch the robbers?" gasped Frank, in wonder.

"Yes," replied Bob, in a way that showed he was very much in earnest.

"Say, wouldn't it be grand if we could!" cried Sammy.

"Why, there's a reward of two hundred dollars for that!"

"Yes, but we wouldn't take it from Mr. Haven," said Bob, quickly.

"That's so, I forgot," replied Sammy, readily.

"Have you found out something, Bob?" asked Frank, seriously.

"I think I have."

"What is it?" asked Sammy.

"I can't tell you all at once," replied Bob. "There's just this, though, fellows; I know that two tramps were in town yesterday."

"You do!" cried Sammy.

"Yes."

"And you think they are the robbers?"

"I'm pretty sure of it. Frank, do you remember my telling you about the two men hiding on the bluff the night of the bonfire?"

"Yes, Bob."

"And how they were talking about robbing somebody?"

"And you told your father, and he got the marshal to look for them?"

"That's it."

"But they got out of town."

"Yes. Well, those fellows were here again yesterday."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Sammy.

"Yes, they were. I'm going to tell you something else."

"What's that?" asked Frank.

"You know, we thought you lost the key to your father's jewelry store in Silas Dolby's yard?"

"I know I did."

"Well, I've found out that one of the tramps knows Mr. Dolby. In fact, he was at his house right after you lost the key."

"Why, Bob," cried Sammy, "then old Dolby broke into the jewelry store?"

"Oh, dear, no, I can't know that," said Bob, quickly. "I don't say so, either."

"But—"

"I'm just putting this and that together."

"I should think you were!" said Sammy.

"We know that Mr. Dolby has a bad name, and is tricky and all that, but he wouldn't rob a neighbor," went on Bob. "He knows one of the robbers, though. I happen to know he has had business with him. Mr. Dolby may not know that the tramp is a bad man, but somehow or other I can't get it out of my head that the key to the jewelry store Frank lost was the one that was used by the robbers."

"We know it was, Bob," spoke Frank. "There were only two keys, and my uncle had the other."

"How the robbers got hold of it, I don't know. I can think of a way, but it's only a guess."

"What is it, Bob?" asked Frank.

"Why, Mr. Dolby may have spoken of your losing it in his yard."

"That's so."

"And the robber hunted for it and found it."

"How are we going to find out?"

"Well," said Bob, "I thought we'd go down to Mr. Dolby's place, and hang around and watch it."

"Maybe the robbers are there now," cried Sammy, quickly.

"The marshal says he believes they are in hiding somewhere near Fairview," said Frank. "They had to have two big satchels to handle all the stuff they stole. Anybody seeing two men carrying big satchels would remember them. The marshal says he and his men have gone over every road in the county, and they haven't found a trace of the robbers."

"All right, we'll try too," spoke Bob, with a good deal of confidence.

"Say," observed Sammy, "hadn't we ought to have stars?"

"Why, what for?" asked Bob.

"To arrest the robbers."

Bob laughed outright.

"You great detective!" he railed. "Badges and clubs, and horse-pistols, too, I suppose?"

"Well, don't you expect to catch the robbers?"

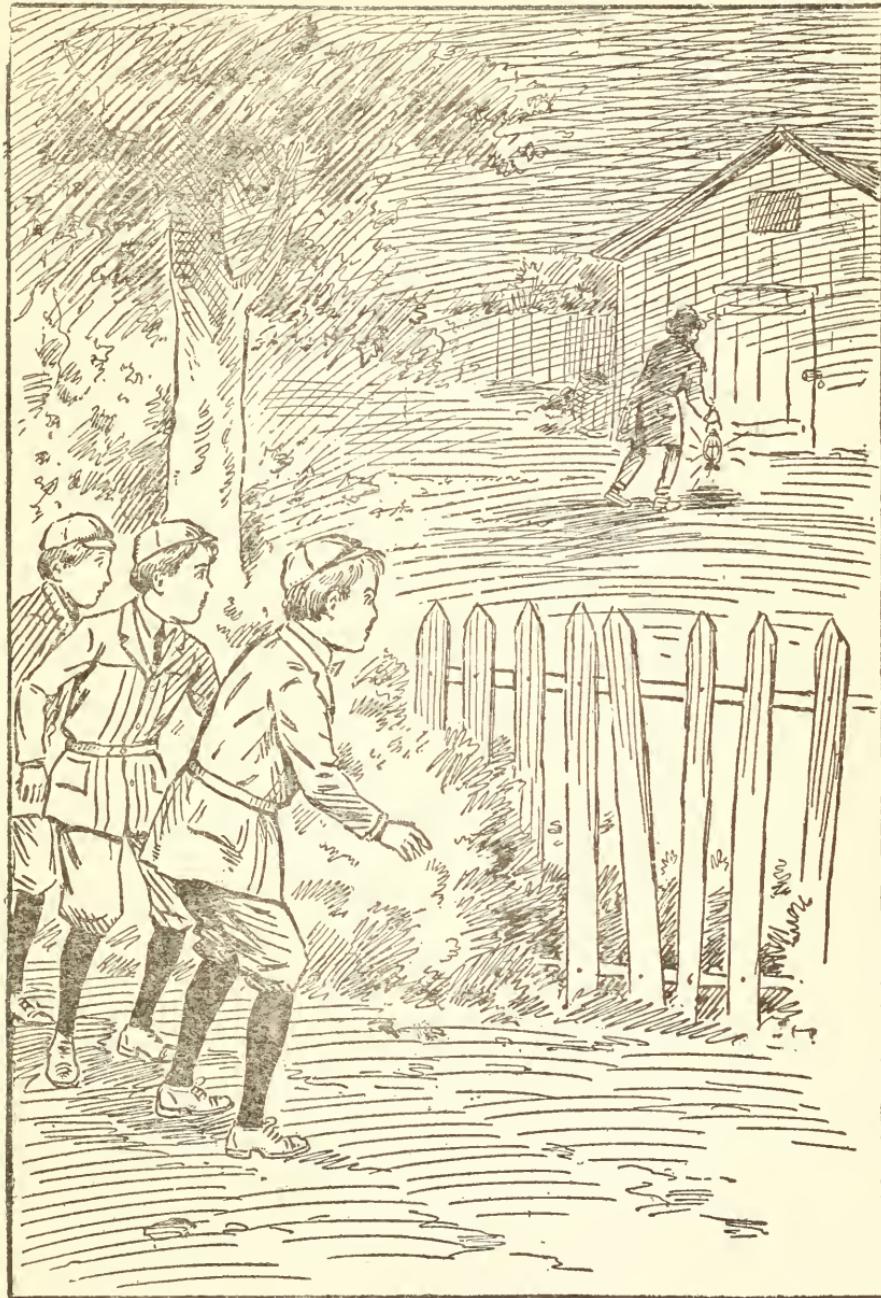
"I hope to find out something about them to tell the marshal, yes," replied Bob. "Come on, fellows."

Bob led the way to the dismal abode where the old miser lived. He halted under a tree near the fence of the place.

"Now, then," he said to Frank and Sammy, "stay here till I skirmish around a bit."

"All right," replied his companions, in a breath.

Bob went slowly and cautiously all around the fenced-in lot. He made sure that the big vicious dog old Dolby owned was chained up and asleep. The house looked dark and



*They Saw the Miser Go Out to the Old,
Ricketty Barn*

dreary, as usual, except in the living-room, where the miser passed most of his time.

Bob vaulted the fence and got down on hands and knees. He crept across the garden without making any noise, and paused right under the window of the room where there was a light. He could hear some one moving about inside. Finally, Bob ventured to raise his head and peer past the ragged end of a curtain. For fully five minutes the boy watched the miser. Then he went back to his friends.

"Well?" asked Frank.

"Mr. Dolby is in the house," replied Bob, "but I didn't see any one else."

"Then the robbers aren't there," broke in Sammy.

"I don't know that."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Oh, keep on watching for a spell," replied Bob, "and thinking."

Bob wondered if he had better not go and tell the marshal all that he knew. The boy kept quiet until Sammy spoke in a quick whisper the words:

"Bob, old Dolby is coming outside!"

"That's so," added Frank.

"He's got a lantern," continued Sammy.

"Hush!" warned Bob. "Keep quiet and watch!"

They saw the miser go out to the old rickety barn at the rear of the lot. The dog growled, but quieted down at a snarl from his master. Bob ducked down as he ran along the fence and got behind the barn.

He could see, through broad cracks in the barn, its owner slowly climbing a cleat ladder at one corner, carrying the lantern with him. There was a shed near the barn. Its slanting roof came almost up to the loft of the barn.

Bob could see into this part of the building clearly

through gaping breaks in the rotted boards. The miser had set down the lantern. There was no hay in the loft, except a little heap in one corner. Upon this was spread a blanket.

"Some one has been sleeping in the loft," Bob decided. "He's gone now, though."

Silas Dolby took up the blanket and folded it. Then he took some dishes, a cup, plate, knife and fork from an old chair. These he placed on top of the folded blanket. He held blanket, dishes and lantern on one arm. Then he came down the ladder. In a few minutes the miser went back into the house.

"Well, that's all plain," said Bob to himself. "Some one has been sleeping and hiding in the barn. Who could it be but that tramp? Then, if he robbed the jewelry store, where did he put the stuff he stole?"

Bob went back to Frank and Sammy. He had about made up his mind to go straight to Mr. Haven, and tell him all he had found out. It was Bob's idea that Frank's father and the marshal could scare the old miser into telling enough about the tramp to lead to his arrest.

"Why, hello, where are they?" exclaimed Bob, as he reached the tree where he had left Frank and Sammy.

They were nowhere to be seen. As Bob looked around, somewhat puzzled, a sound came from some near bushes.

"Hist!"

Bob strained his eyes and made out Frank near the bushes. He beckoned to Bob.

"What is it?" asked Bob. "What are you hiding for?"

"Some one crossed over from behind the barn."

"Who was it?"

"A stranger, so Sammy has cut through the brush lot here to keep him in sight."

"Which way?"

"Come on, I'll show you," said Frank.

Both boys stole silently across the lot. They ran upon Sammy near some trees.

"He's just turned into the road yonder," panted Sammy.

Bob hurried to the spot where Sammy pointed. He saw a man going down the highway whom he thought he had never seen before. He was certainly a stranger to Fairview. The man had a cane, and was bent over it as if he was old or sick.

"Where did he come from?" asked Bob.

"Beyond Dolby's barn," replied Frank.

"I didn't see him near it," said Bob, "but maybe he went out of a door on the far side of the barn."

"Is he the man you know about, Bob?" asked Sammy.

"He doesn't look like it," said Bob.

"I saw him pretty plain when I sneaked over here," spoke Sammy. "He looks like a tramp."

"Hello!" broke in Bob, "that's queer."

"What is queer?" asked Frank.

"Why, just as the man came near that first house," said Bob, "he stooped more and walked more lame. That looks as if the man was playing off."

"Yes, it's sort of suspicious," said Sammy.

"Say, fellows," added Bob, "we want to keep that man in sight. He may lead us to something worth finding out!"

CHAPTER XIII

AN EXCITING HOUR

"Do you suppose that man is one of the robbers?" asked Sammy.

"I don't know about that," replied Bob. "But he doesn't act right."

"No, he isn't any more lame than I am," declared Frank.

"Just look at him," spoke Bob, quickly.

Some one was coming down the street. The minute the man saw the boys were following him, he began to act like a weak old man. He spoke to the other man in a whining kind of a tone. Bob cut across a yard to head off the man the stranger had spoken to. He found him to be Mr. Dale, the village postmaster.

"Oh, Mr. Dale," spoke Bob, "will you please tell me what that man who stopped you just now said to you?"

"Oh, is that you, Bob? Why, yes, he is a beggar and he asked me for a nickel. He says he is trying to get to Bartonville. Was hurt in an accident, he told me, and his eyesight is nearly gone. Do you know him?"

"No, sir, I was just curious about him. Thank you, Mr. Dale."

Bob bolted off and got back to his friends. He told them what Mr. Dale had said. Then he added:

"Now, then, fellows, we're going to follow that man. I feel sure he isn't honest."

"I don't think so, either," said Frank.

"Keep close inside the yards. We don't want to have him suspect that we're after him."

Frank and Sammy did just as Bob told them to do. Sammy was in his element. He found himself in the midst of a mystery, as he called it, and was greatly excited.

The man they were following kept along the street. The boys skulked from place to place inside of yards and across vacant lots. They knew the neighborhood well, and were never at a loss to get ahead.

When the man came to where the streets were more deserted and the houses further apart, he began to move faster.

"See that," said Bob. "He can walk straight as an arrow when he wants to!"

"Oh, yes, he is just putting on his lameness and all that," added Frank.

"Say, fellows," whispered Sammy, "see where he's going now!"

They had reached the edge of the town. The man ahead of them had crossed a stretch that was a lonely patch of high weeds and bushes.

"He's making for the schoolhouse," said Frank.

"That's what he is," spoke Sammy.

"No—see," added Bob, "he's stopped near the old water hole where they used to graze the cattle."

The three boys were crowded up against a fence, and kept staring after the man and noticing every move he made. He stood still near the spot Bob had mentioned. Then he put his fingers to his lips.

The boys caught the echo of a soft birdlike call. They breathlessly watched the man's figure as it stood outlined against the sky. Then in a minute or two there came a reply to the whistle.

"This is getting exciting," said Frank.

"Listen," ordered Bob.

The man they had followed replied to the last whistle. Then the boys saw another man come from some shrubbery just beyond the schoolhouse wall.

"Oh, my!" gasped Bob.

"What is it?" whispered Frank.

"Don't you see?"

"What?"

"The last man! He's carrying two satchels!"

"Why, then," said Sammy, "they've got the stolen jewelry in them!"

"S-sh!" warned Bob.

He was terribly excited. Not for an instant did he doubt that the satchels held the plunder of which the robbers had rifled Mr. Haven's jewelry store. Bob thought it out this way: These two men were the thieves. They had not risked carrying their plunder away from Fairview, knowing they would be pursued, but had hidden it. Then they had gone into hiding themselves. The tramp whom Bob knew had found shelter in Silas Dolby's barn. The other man had found safety in some other spot.

"Now, then," spoke Bob, quickly, "you, Sammy."

"Yes?" replied Sammy, on pins and needles of excitement.

"Run as fast as you can to town, and tell the marshal that the jewelry store robbers are down here near the schoolhouse."

"You bet I'll run!" said Sammy. "But will they be here when we get back?"

"Probably not, but they won't be far away."

"What are you going to do?"

"I will keep them in sight, and Frank will help me."

"Oh, I hope we catch them!" said Sammy.

"Don't delay."

"I won't."

Sammy sneaked along the fence until he got out of range of the men. Then he arose to his feet, and got out of sight in the direction of the village in a flash.

"What are those men doing now?" asked Frank, a moment later.

Bob craned his neck and bent his ear. He could hear only the vague murmur of voices. He could not make out any clear words. The last man to come on the scene kept the satchels, one in each hand. Finally the two men started off. They seemed to be wrangling about something.

"Frank," said Bob, "all we've got to do now is not to lose sight of those men."

"Till the marshal catches up with us," replied Frank.

"I'm going to get nearer to them."

"It's risky."

"Well, I want to find out all I can."

"What shall I do?"

"Follow very slowly. If they see me or anything happens we don't expect, don't you lose sight of them till the marshal comes."

"All right, Bob. Oh, I do hope they are the people you think they are, and that father is going to get back his property!"

Bob now began crawling flat on the ground across the open field. When he came to where the weeds or bushes were high he ran a bit, but kept stooping as low as he could all of the time.

In this way, Bob had gained quite a little on the men. Once they rested, near a little clump of shrubbery just beyond the schoolhouse. The man Bob believed to be the tramp went ahead, as if seeing if the road was clear. The other man sat down on one of the satchels, and the boy got quite near to him.

"It's the man I saw in the hide-out!" whispered Bob to himself. "It's the man with the green shade over his eye! Now I am sure these men are the fellows who broke into the jewelry store."

"I guess it's safe to go on," said the tramp, coming back to his friend.

"All right."

"Here, I'll carry one of the satchels."

"Oh, no; they're not heavy."

"But I want to."

"Well, you can't, and I won't let you."

"Huh!" said the tramp in an angry way, "what's the matter with you?"

"Well, for one thing, I know you," said the other man.

"Oh, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I shan't drop these satchels till we get to where the man who hired us is waiting for us."

"It's two miles away."

"I don't care if it's ten miles away. If you got your paws on one of these satchels, you might bolt with it."

"Well, I've done some of the work, haven't I? Who found the key to the jewelry store?"

"You did, and our boss will pay you well for your share of the work, but you don't handle these satchels."

"I bet I do!"

The tramp suddenly sprang at his companion, but the other was too quick for him. The man with the green shade over his eye sprang to his feet. He whirled one satchel around. It struck the tramp on the head and swept him to the ground.

The man with the green shade over his eye at once picked up the two satchels, and started on a run. In a minute he was

around the corner of the schoolhouse and out of sight. The tramp sprang to his feet with an angry cry.

Bob did not dare to move from the shelter of the shrubbery at once. He thought he heard something drop around on the other side of the schoolhouse. As the tramp ran around its end, Bob hurried forward and peered towards the road.

"Why," said Bob, in great surprise, "what has become of the satchels?"

He could see the man in the lead about two hundred yards away, as he jumped into a ditch and was gone from sight. The tramp was putting after him as fast as he could. One thing was sure: neither of them had the satchels.

"Where could they have gone to?" Bob asked himself.

He ran to the road. The tramp was standing in the middle of it, at a loss where to go. The other man was nowhere to be seen. Finally the tramp ran into some woods lining the road, on a search for the man who had run away from him.

Frank, who had kept track of Bob in cautious stages, came up to him now.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"Somewhere in the woods," answered Bob. "They have had a quarrel."

"Yes, I noticed it."

"We couldn't do much if we caught up to them. Hark, Frank!"

Down the road beyond the schoolhouse echoed the sound of horses' hoofs and wagon wheels.

"It's some one driving awfully fast," said Frank.

"It must be the marshal! Yes, I think it is," said Bob, peering down the road.

Then he ran to the middle of the highway, and down it,

waving his arms. The wagon stopped, and Bob saw that it held the marshal, and three other men, and Sammy.

"Where are those men, Bob?" asked the marshal, quickly.

Bob told enough to give the officer an idea of how things stood. The marshal drove the wagon up to the side of the road, and then he and two of the men who had come in the wagon started out to scour the woods.

Bob told Frank and Sammy about the two satchels being gone when he ran around the schoolhouse corner. They at once began a search all about the place and even out to the ditch, but found no trace of the valises.

"See here, Bob," said Frank, "maybe the man threw them into the ditch, jumped after them, and got away with them?"

"I hardly think that," replied Bob. "He didn't have them with him the last sight I had of him."

The boys had a long wait of it. It was over an hour before one of the men came back.

"We've beat the woods in every direction," he told them. "The marshal and his aid have kept up the hunt. We're to go back and start some more men on the chase."

Up to the time, two hours later, that Bob, Frank and Sammy stayed up, no trace was found of the jewelry store robbers.

CHAPTER XIV

FIRE

“YOU quit that, Jed Burr!”

“Shut up, or I’ll lam you worse.”

Bob Bouncer paused as he was on a run to join Frank and the others across the playground.

Bob was passing the row of shrubbery, from which he had spied the jewelry store robbers the night before. Now, halting and peering through those same bushes, he saw Jed cuffing a helpless member of his crowd, three years his junior and about half his size.

This was Ned Thomas, a weak, timid little fellow, who was so afraid of the big leader of “The Blues,” that he had fetched and carried for Jed all the last school term. Jed imposed on him terribly. The way he held the little fellow, was to make him believe he would work him into the ball nine in time.

Ned was sobbing and crying. Jed had knocked his cap off. He threatened him with his fists.

“You do as I say,” he was speaking now.

“I can’t, I won’t,” choked out Ned. “I just felt splendid at my luck in writing what I did. And you’ve taken it.”

“I gave you mine.”

“Humph! Yours! You give it back to me, Jed Burr! If you don’t, I’ll go home. I won’t go to school at all.”

“Do it, then,” shouted Jed. “See here,” seizing the little fellow, and shaking him hard, “you blab one word, and I

won't let a fellow in the crowd play with you, or even speak to you."

"See here, Jed Burr, you drop that," cried Bob, stepping into view and pulling Ned away from the grasp of the bully.

"Hello! sneaking around, are you?"

"I don't have to sneak," replied Bob.

"Mind your own business."

"I'm minding it fine when I save a little fellow from your meanness."

"Say, I'll lick you," cried Jed, doubling up his fists.

Bob said nothing. He just looked the bully squarely in the eye.

"Some time. You see if I don't," added Jed.

Bob did not move. Jed edged away.

"I'll give it to you good and hard," scowled Jed, and went clear away.

"See here, Ned," said Bob, going up to the weeping boy, and placing his hand on his shoulder in a kindly way.

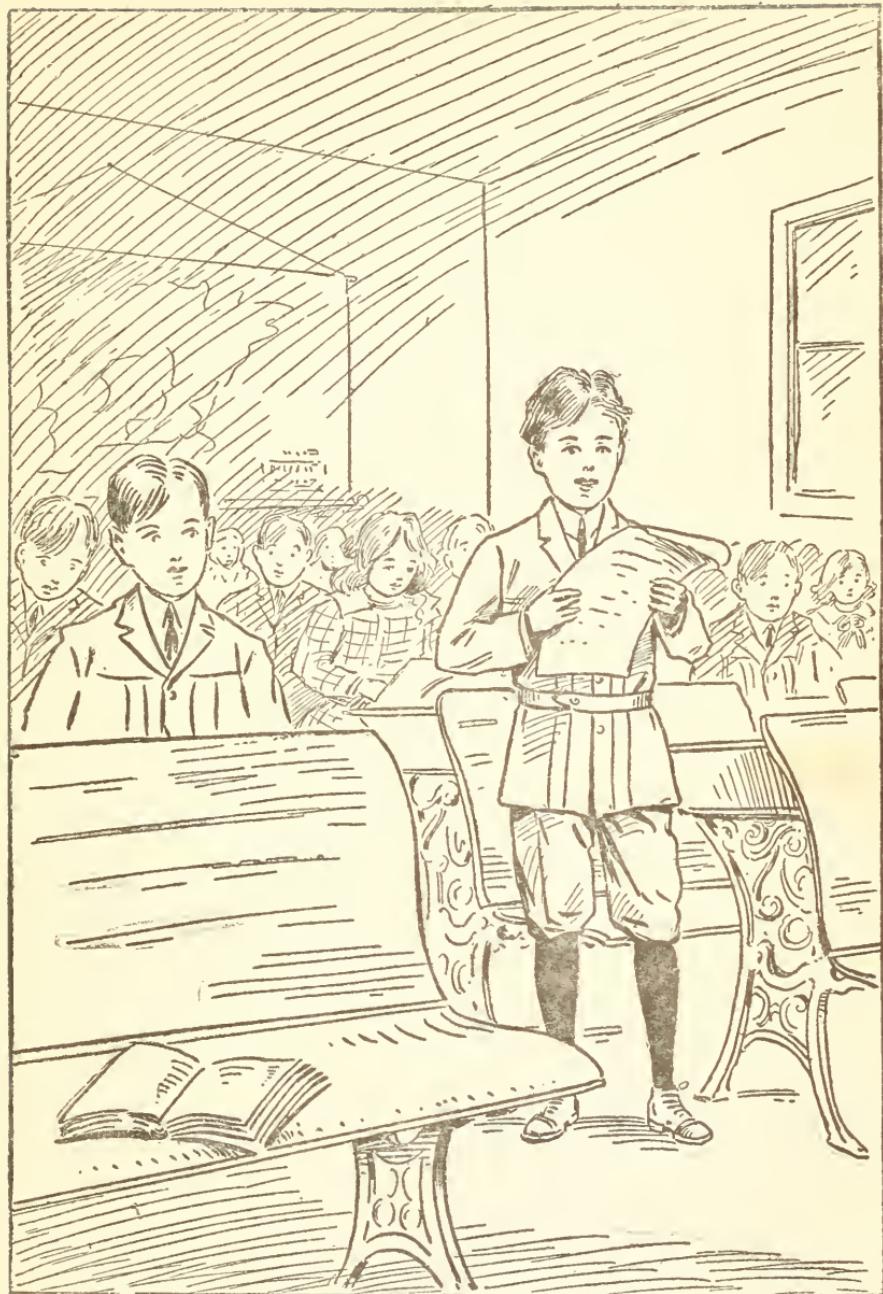
"Leave me alone," sniffled the little fellow. "Jed has spoiled everything. I'll stay away from school. I'll play hookey."

Just then the school bell rang. Bob had to let the little fellow go his own way. There was a special programme for that morning, and Bob's mind was full of it. This was the public reading of a composition on "Ceylon." A prize was to be given for the best piece.

On these occasions at times several visitors came to the school. As he entered, Bob noticed a number of ladies whom he knew. Seated in a chair near the platform was a young man smartly dressed, who wore a single eye-glass.

"He's the English artist staying at Ned Thomas's house," Frank whispered to Bob.

Several scholars read their pieces, Bob among the number.



Several Scholars Read Their Pieces

They were all very good, for the writers were allowed to consult books, and even get help from others. The story had to be told in their own language.

Bob noticed that Ned was absent. When Jed Burr's turn came, the bully stood up in his usual bold way, and began drawling out the contents of the written paper in his hand.

Even Bob had to confess to himself that Jed's paper was very fine. It told things about Ceylon that the other boys had not mentioned. Jed read about the wonderful tricks of the elephants in that country.

As he did this, Bob noticed the English artist straighten up, fix his eye-glass, and stare at Jed. He was sure he heard the artist speak the words:

“Ah, extrawordinary, you know!”

When Jed told of how the women of Ceylon worked, carrying great loads on their backs, the artist said, under his breath:

“I say, remawkable!”

This puzzled Bob, for the artist kept staring hard at Jed, and rubbing his head, as if something had happened that he could not understand.

When recess came the artist went up to Miss Williams. Bob noticed that he spoke to her quite seriously. Most of the scholars had gone out onto the playground, and Bob was about to join them, when the teacher said:

“Will you come here for a moment, Bob?”

“Yes, Miss Williams,” he replied, going up to her desk.

“Have you seen Ned Thomas to-day?” asked Miss Williams.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Do you know what kept him from school?”

“I think I half know, Miss Williams, but I don't care to say anything about it.”

"You should speak out, my lad," said the artist. "Some wrong work has been going on, and we wish to get at the bottom of it, don't you know."

"I'll tell you, Miss Williams," spoke Bob; "you had better ask Ned about it."

"But he is not here, Bob."

"No, but I'll try and find him."

"I wish you would, Bob," said the teacher.

Bob started out on his hunt for the truant. He wondered a good deal about what was up. Nobody on the playground had seen Ned. Finally, a boy who lived near by, and who had run home for a quick bite to eat, told Bob that little Ned was playing over near a spring in the woods.

Bob came across Ned wading in some water. His feet were soaked and his clothes muddy. He had been building a little dam, and he looked reckless and unhappy.

"Teacher wants you, Ned," said Bob.

"I don't want to see teacher," spoke Ned, in a sullen way.

"You've got to."

"What for?"

"She'll tell you."

"I won't go," declared the little fellow, starting to wade deeper into the water.

"No, you don't," said Bob, quickly, catching hold of Ned's arm. "See here, don't be a gump. The artist who boards down at your house is up at the schoolhouse with the teacher."

"Oh, is he?" cried Ned, brightening up. "I'll go, then, Bob."

All the scholars looked curious as Bob crossed the playground with Ned in his charge.

"Close the door, Bob," spoke Miss Williams, as Bob led Ned into the schoolroom. "You can remain, if you like."

Bob sat down at one of the desks. In a halting, shame-faced way Ned hunched up to the teacher.

"I didn't mean to play hookey. It wasn't my fault," he blurted out.

"Ah, my lad," here spoke the artist, "you know I was a bit —ah—er—surprised, don't you know, and I wanted to awsk you something."

"Yes, sir," blubbered Ned, humbly, with eyes cast down.

"I gave you some stories of my journey through Ceylon for your composition, you know. Another lad read them off here this morning."

"He stole my paper from me," burst out Ned. "The mean bully! He gave me his to read, but I tore it up. I won't stand it any longer," and Ned began to bawl.

"It's a clear case, Miss," said the artist. "A—ah, er—decidedly mean theft. This Thistle boy——"

"Burr," corrected the teacher, with a smile.

"Ah, yes, Burr. He should be exposed, Miss."

"I think the school board will expel him when they know the facts of the case," said the teacher.

"Won't he be boss of 'The Blues' any more, then?" asked Ned, eagerly.

"I fancy not," replied Miss Williams.

"Then I ain't afraid any more," cried Ned. "I'll tell the truth; yes, I will. I've been a mean boy, but Jed Burr made me that. He got me to play all kinds of tricks on the scholars; and say, Miss Williams," added Ned, with a quick glance at Bob, "Jed stole a spelling list from your desk, and some of his fellows copied it, and Jed got me to put it in Bob Bouncer's desk, so as to get him into trouble."

"Oh, Bob!" cried Miss Williams, coming up to him and putting out her hand, "I have wronged you very greatly!"

"Don't speak of it, Miss Williams," replied Bob, smiling loyally. "It's all right now, isn't it?"

"You are a noble boy, Bob," said his teacher.

"I think it's myself that wronged somebody," said Bob to himself, as he left the schoolhouse. "Here I went and suspected poor Tom Chubb of what he never did. A fine friend I am! I'm going to tell him how mean I've been."

Tom thought Bob quite the best friend he had heard of, when Bob told his story.

"Wouldn't tell on a friend, would you?" said Tom. "The only mistake was your thinking I was smart enough to get hold of that spelling list."

"It wasn't very smart in Jed Burr, the way it has turned out," said Frank.

"That's so," echoed Sammy. "It pays to be straight."

At noon Jed Burr was sent home with a note to his parents. It told that he was suspended from school until the school board were told of his unfairness and misdoings.

Bob felt that something more than being sorry was due to Tom. He invited him and Frank and Sammy to tea to his house that evening.

The four boys were playing a game of tennis just at dusk, when they heard a yell down the road. Bob ran out to the gate.

A man was coming pell-mell down the middle of the road. He was waving his arms wildly.

"Hurry, run!" he shouted, as he espied the boys.

"What's the matter?" bawled Sammy.

"Fire!" yelled the runner, never stopping to take breath. "At the schoolhouse—it's on fire, and burning up!"

CHAPTER XV

THE CAPTURE—CONCLUSION

“THE mischief!” cried Bob.

“Schoolhouse burning up!” echoed Sammy. “That’s big news.”

“Come on, fellows!” ordered Frank, making a rush down the road.

“Don’t wait for me,” said Tom. “I’m too fat to run fast.”

“Say, I don’t see any blaze,” spoke Bob.

“No, but look—everybody is putting for the schoolhouse!” cried Sammy.

This was true. In the dim dusk they could see men, women and children rushing in the direction of the schoolhouse. They could hear the man who had told the news, and others, shouting nearer to the center of the village.

The news seemed to spread like wildfire. Just as the boys joined the procession hurrying to the schoolhouse, they caught the echo of a great clang and clatter.

“They’ve got the hose-cart out,” said Bob.

“The schoolhouse is on fire!” cried Sammy.

“Sure enough,” added Frank.

They were now in full sight of the school building. From one end a great volume of smoke was pouring out of the windows. Then, just as they bounded over the fence, one of a dozen men already come upon the scene, ran at a door and kicked it in.

At once the flames came out in a sheet. Some one shouted

for buckets. Bob knew where there was one under the school building, in use when people drove to the school and wanted to water their horses. He got it out quickly and ran to the pump.

“Help me, Frank,” he called.

Frank and Sammy took turns in pumping. Bob ran with the pail to a man at the broken-in door. The man threw the water inside and Bob went back after more water. Then two men arrived with buckets from the nearest house, and soon half a dozen pails were in use.

Men took the place of the boys and crowded them out of service, but they had done their part.

“What’s that, now?” spoke Bob, as, rounding the building, they came to the little addition to the main school building, used as a storeroom.

“Why,” shouted Sammy, “there’s some one inside!”

“It looks so,” spoke Frank, in wonder.

Bang, clatter, crash!—the rear window of the storeroom was smashed out from inside. A man leaped into view. He must have been sleeping in the place, and the fire must have started between the storeroom and the schoolhouse door. He could not get past it, and had broken out that way.

The flames showed the man plainly. He was a stranger to Fairview, and had a green patch over one eye. As he jumped from the window he stumbled and fell to the ground. He was on his feet at once. Then he started to run away from the spot.

“Say, I know him!” cried Bob.

“Who is it?” asked Frank.

“One of the robbers!”

“You don’t say so!” spoke Sammy.

“Stop that man—stop that man!” yelled Bob at the top of his voice.

He and his friends ran after the fellow. The rascal's way was blocked, and he was caught and held by two men who had heard Bob's cries.

"Aha! who are you?" demanded one of the captors.

"I'm only a poor tramp. Went into the schoolhouse to get warm."

"He's one of the men who robbed Mr. Haven's jewelry store," declared Bob, excitedly.

"Is that so!" exclaimed the man's captor.

"Yes, it is."

"Bob, here comes the marshal," spoke Frank just then.

"And the hose-cart," added Sammy.

Bob ran to meet the marshal. He told much that made the officer very anxious to take the man with the green shade over one eye in charge. The hose-cart men soon attacked the fire, which had been caused by some hot coals falling on the floor from the big stove in the schoolroom. Soon the blaze was put out.

"You stay with me, Bob," said the marshal, keeping tight hold of his prisoner. "I want to question this fellow. You seem to know more about him than any one else."

The marshal led the man to the nearest house. Its owner took them into a sitting-room.

"Now, then, Bob," said the marshal, "you are sure this is the man you saw with two satchels the night you told me about?"

"Yes, sir, I am," replied Bob.

"My man," asked the marshal, "what did you do with those satchels?"

"I'm not going to get myself into trouble by telling," replied the robber, sullenly.

"You're in pretty bad trouble already, if you only knew it," said the marshal.

"Well, supposing I tell?"

"It will be the easier for you."

"I didn't break into the jewelry store."

"Who did?"

"My partner."

"Very well, tell us where he is, and about those satchels, and we'll make it as light for you as we can."

"Is that a bargain?"

"It is."

"All right," said the man with the green shade over his eye. "I dropped them under the pump platform into the schoolhouse well."

"Mr. Ward," said Bob, quickly, to the marshal, "send for a well-cleaner, and see if he is telling the truth."

"Say, Bob, the whole town is talking about you," spoke Frank Haven.

"Are they?"

"Yes."

"I should think they would!" cried Sammy Brown. "Why, you've done the biggest thing ever done in Fairview."

"Oh, pshaw!" said Bob, flushing up, "you're making too much of nothing."

"Nothing?" echoed Frank. "Do you call it nothing saving my father from ruin, Bob Bouncer?"

"Have I done that?"

"Father says so, and he sent us down to bring you right up to the house."

"What for?" asked Bob.

"He wants to pay you that reward."

"Well," replied Bob, "he simply can't do it. Do you suppose I'd let the father of my best chum pay me for what any boy would be glad to do? I guess not, Frank Haven!"

"He wants to see you, anyway, so you've got to come along."

"That's a fact," put in Tom Chubb. "No getting out of it, Bob."

The others surrounded Bob and marched him down the street. A dozen people met him and shook hands with him. They met Minnie Grey, who called Bob "a hero," and cried, as she always did when Bob met with "good luck," as she called it. Little crippled Benny Lane cheered Bob with a dozen hurrahs as they passed his home.

The satchels had been found in the schoolhouse well, and only a few pieces of jewelry were missing. The captured robber was now in jail, and the marshal and his men were looking for his partner.

It came out that the tramp had heard Silas Dolby tell about the lost key to the jewelry store, and had found it in his garden. He had been given shelter in the old miser's barn, because Mr. Dolby was afraid to refuse him, he was such a rough, ugly fellow.

When the boys reached Frank's home, Mr. Haven came out and met them. He grasped both of Bob's hands, all smiles, and as happy as he could be.

"Well, Bob," he said, "I suppose you've come for that reward?"

"Not a cent of it, Mr. Haven," replied Bob, firmly.

"I have decided to give you one hundred dollars, Bob. The balance, I suppose, should go to the marshal and his men."

"Mr. Haven," said Bob, "my father told me that if I took so much as a cent from a good neighbor like you, he'd invite me out to the barn with a strap."

"Why, the town would mob him if he laid a finger on its hero!" declared Mr. Haven.

"All right," laughed Bob, "but you know I must obey my parents."

Mr. Haven was silent for a moment or two. He looked over the four fine-spirited lads in a proud and kindly way. Then he said:

"Well, Bob, as you won't have the reward, I shall go to work on a new plan. I intend to have the loft of the old barn fixed up nice and tidy for a clubroom for you and your friends."

"Oh, father, that will be fine!" cried Frank.

"Famous!" echoed Sammy.

"I shall spend the hundred dollars getting you the best gymnasium outfit it will buy," added Mr. Haven.

"Hurrah!" shouted Tom Chubb.

"Vacation until they fix up the schoolhouse, and that grand gymnasium to think of!" said Sammy Brown. "Say, fellows, we're having the finest time on earth!"

Then the boys gave three rousing cheers for Frank Haven's father, and started out on a new round of healthy fun and adventure, as will be related in the next volume of this series, to be called, "Fairview Boys at Camp Mystery; Or, The Old Hermit and His Secret."

"We are bound to have lots more of fun and excitement," said Bob Bouncer.

And they did.

THE END

